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by William F. Schwartz

THE SQUEEZE

by Matt Christopher



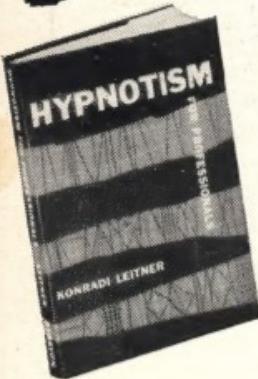
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Smashing **DETECTIVE** STORIES

Volume 5

July, 1956

Number 1

Our Featured Novelet

THE WRONG KILLER. (Nate Stone Story)

by William F. Schwartz 6

The case seemed simple enough, especially when the old handyman, Derek Walters, confessed to killing Spider Rayburn. But there was something in that confession which convinced Nate Stone that Walters was mistaken—and innocent!



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- DEATH OF A PAMPERED PIGEON (Sergeant Oliver Story) Dennis Wiegand 22
Snooky Snead was the king of cribmen; he couldn't have blown himself up.
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Can you figure out how Detective Pearson knew this was murder?
- THE SQUEEZE Matt Christopher 32
Cantella knew he was being squeezed, but didn't guess the full plot.
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The old lady wasn't what she appeared to be at all...
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Did Aldrich really foresee his own death—the way he foresaw other things?
- NO BURGLARS, PLEASE! (Special Feature) E. E. Clement 64
Some commonsense tips on how to avoid visits from second story men.
- THE BIG SQUAWK Thomas Thursday 65
The parrot was supposed to be the star witness...only...
- THE FACE OF NEMESIS (Novelet) Reuben Jenner 75
The only way Sloane could be saved from robbery—was by being robbed!

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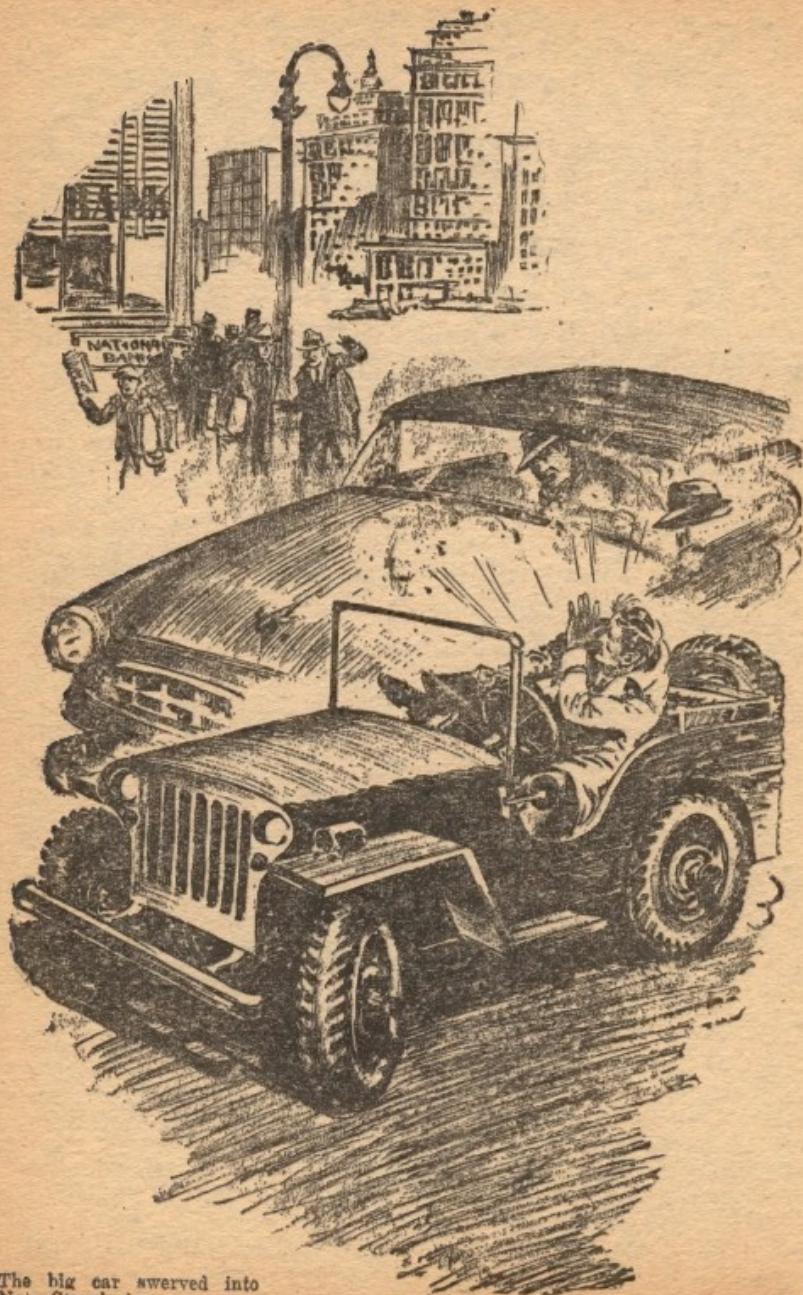
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The big car swerved into
Nate Stone's jeep...

Why should Stone be so sure this fellow was innocent, once he heard that Spider Rayburn had been slain in his own parlor? After all, hadn't Derek Walters confessed?

THE WRONG KILLER

Nate Stone Novelet

by WILLIAM F. SCHWARTZ

DEPUTY SHERIFF Nate Stone's breakfast that drizzly morning in April had consisted of sausage and eggs, french fried potatoes, toast and sweet milk; there had been an even half dozen eggs and two quarts of milk; the remainder of the food had been in proportion.

So Nate, never a stranger to slothful slumber, was in the mood for a long snooze when he waddled into the one-room frame building that was his office in the sleepy country town of Toddville. A lengthy nap, he told himself, was just what he needed to permit the meal to digest. After all, in another three or four hours, it would be time for lunch.

Nate lowered his overcushioned body into a swivel chair behind a battered roll top desk; the chair moaned in squeaking protest as the hefty bulk of Nate's two hundred and seventy-five pounds of bone, muscle and suet descended upon it.

Nate ignored the threatening squeaks. He wiped some smudges of egg from his thick lips with a hair-backed hand that was as large as a ham, shoved his sweat-strained Stetson back from his balding brow, hoisted his size fourteen half-boots to the top of the desk. He was ready for sleep.

But then there was a jarring interruption. The phone on his desk began to ring.

Nate glared at the phone—morosely, at first, and then with loathing. To him, for the moment, the phone was transformed into a distasteful living creature—like an angry polecat that had him backed off into a corner from whence there was no escape.

For Nate felt backed off into a corner—and trapped—by the telephone. To him, its ringing forboded nothing but grief. Some citizen, no doubt, had committed some crime and he, Nate Stone, was being summoned to make an arrest.

He hated to be summoned to make arrests—not that he was cowardly, but making arrests could be heaps of work, and exercise, at times. Nate had a strong dislike for all forms of work and exercise.

But still, he knew, he had to answer the phone. It could be somebody from the Court House at the County Seat calling him, just to make certain he was on the job. Nate heaved a sigh, reluctantly lifted the phone from its hook and held it against his hairy ear. "Hello!" he grunted.

"Hello! Hello! Is that you, Deputy?" a voice demanded in his ear over

the phone. It was a woman's voice and she sounded excited, Nate; noted.

"Yeah. It's me," Nate admitted. "Who are you?"

"This is Mrs. Peevey callin'," the voice informed him. "I'm over at Spider Rayburn's farm; you better get over here quick."

"Why?" Nate probed, without feeling.

"There's been a murder, Deputy!"

“WHAT!” NATE ejaculated, not because he was disgusted. Murders, he knew from sad experience sometimes meant heaps of work—and exercise; and he was in no mood for exercise. “Who got murdered? And why?”

“Spider got murdered,” Mrs. Peevey told him. “I don't know why—and I don't know by whom. I just know he got murdered; that's all.”

“And how do you know he got murdered, Mrs. Peevey?”

“Well, he's daid. And he's all bloody; looks to me like he got shot. I came over here this mornin' to Spider's place to try to collect some money he owes me for housecleanin' and I found him all dead and bloody. I can't see no gun nowhere around the place, so I reckon it ain't suicide. It must be murder. Nate, you better get over here right soon! I ain't hankerin' to spend all mornin' here alone with a bloody corpse.”

Nate sighed heavily. Gone, he told himself, was all hope of a morning of blissful slumber. Aloud, to Mrs. Peevey, he said, “I'll be right over—soon as I call the State Police. Don't touch a thing, Mrs. Peevey; I'll be right over.”

“I won't,” she promised him. “But hurry!”

Nate telephoned the nearest State Police Headquarters and asked for Corporal Timothy Meehan, with whom he had worked before on murder cases. “Looks like we got a job on our

hands,” Nate informed Meehan, as soon as he had the State Trooper on the other end of the line.

“How come, Nate?”

“Just got a phone call, Corporal. Jasper by the name of Spider Rayburn got himself bumped off by a party—or parties—as yet unknown.”

“Spider who?” Meehan asked. “I got to get this down for my preliminary report. That a nickname—the ‘Spider’ part?”

“Yeah,” Nate told him. “Clarence Tilroy Rayburn is his real handle, I believe. But he's been known as ‘Spider’ around these parts ever since he did some box-fightin' about thirty odd or so years ago. He runs—or I guess I should say ‘ran’—a farm a few miles back off Route Four-O-Nine about three miles south of where the highway forks off toward Hickory Creek Junction.

“The farm's fairly prosperous. Spider usually has a farm hand or two workin' on the place. You're nearer to the farm, Corporal, than I am here in Toddville—so you'll probably get there before I do. Spider had the reputation of being a slow man with a buck where his hired help was concerned. I had a number of complaints durin' the past few years from drifters—Spider usually hired that breed—about Spider givin' them temporary jobs, workin' them half to death and then refusin' to give them a fair shake on their wages. When you get to the farm, Corporal, I'd suggest that you hold—at least till I get there—any of the hired help that might display an urge to head over the hills to escape the toils of justice. And that,” Nate concluded, “includes a Mrs. Peevey, the woman who phoned me here about Spider's sudden demise. I told her to stay at the farm until I got there.”

“Will do,” Meehan agreed. “But why mention Mrs. Peevey in particular? Got any suspicions about her?”

NATE SIGHED, heavily. "I hate to accuse anybody without proof," he related; "and that also includes Mrs. Peevey."

"Who is she, anyway?" Meehan wanted to know.

"She's a widow," Nate told him, "who does house-cleanin' for a livin'. But her specialty, I hear, is bilkin' old men out of any stray cash they might have cached around the premises. She's an old, homely coot—about fifty-five, at least. She got about as much sex appeal as a brewery nag; but she considers herself, I hear, as frisky and as temptin' as filly. In other words, Corporal, she's strictly a Tugboat Annie type, but she fancies herself a second Marilyn Monroe, if yuh get what I mean?"

"I think I do," Meehan said. "Then we consider her a suspect?"

Nate sighed again. "We'll have to, I'm afraid, Corporal. In fact, we'll have to consider everybody who ever had any dealin' with Spider as a suspect. He was that kind of a jasper. To know him was to hate him. He was strictly a foul ball. They'll probably have a celebration in Toddville when the news leaks out that somebody finally gave that critter what is sometimes referred to as his 'just desserts'. But—" he broke off abruptly. "I reckon we better stop jawin' away like a couple of gossipy magpies, Corporal, and get a-movin' out to the farm—before the trail gets too cold.

"But, first, some directions, Corporal. The late Spider Rayburn's farm is just a few miles back in the bushes off Route Four-O-Nine, like I said. It's a two story wooden buildin' with red shingles and a red tin roof. There's a big red barn behind it with pictures of cows and hogs painted on it. Just take the dirt road that turns left near Creedon's Esso Service Station and—"

Nate concluded giving directions, said goodby to Meehan, and waddled out of his office. Nate's jeep, which

was of World War II vintage, was parked on the street outside. The vehicle had no top; but the drizzle had slackened off somewhat, so Nate didn't bother to don the green slicker that was thrown across the front seat.

Nate meshed gears and drove the jeep away from the curb into the center of the street. He headed eastward toward the flat prairie land where Spider's farm was located.

But then it happened.

A gleaming yellow convertible with a cloth top came careening around the corner, going at least sixty miles an hour. The driver of the convertible applied his brakes hastily when he saw Nate's jeep in his path; Nate swung to one side in a vain attempt to avoid a collision.

There was a squeal of brakes; followed by a ripping crash of metal as the left front fender of the convertible plowed into the right rear side of Nate's jeep. The jeep spun around; almost turned turtle.

Nate, however, escaped injury; and the jeep, apparently, was undamaged. But not so the convertible; its left front fender was reduced to a crumpled mass of twisted metal.

THE DRIVER of the convertible climbed out to survey the damage to his car. He was, Nate saw, strictly an Easterner—in garb, at least. He wore shiny, low-cut black slippers, a charcoal gray suit, a pink shirt and a black knit tie. The convertible, Nate noted too, bore a Pennsylvania license plate.

The Easterner scowled at the crumpled fender. He was, Nate saw, about medium size; maybe five feet eight inches tall; but compactly built; weighing maybe about a hundred and sixty pounds. He had coal black hair, a puffy white face and glassy blue eyes. Nate decided, almost at once, that he had been drinking.

The Easterner whirled on Nate. "Who the Hell taught you to drive?"

he demanded. "How the Hell did you ever get a license?"

That nettled Nate, to say the least. He stepped out of the jeep and glared down at the stranger. "You were exceedin' the local speed limit," he accused; "I oughta run you in."

The Easterner stepped closer to Nate. He hesitated only a second or two when he saw the five-pointed star Nate wore on his open vest. "You and who else?" the stranger mocked. He was seething with anger, Nate noted; and the lawman could smell the reek of whiskey on his breath.

"Listen *you*," Nate began. "I'm the Law around here and—"

"I don't care," the other interrupted, "if you're the governor."

"That settles it!" Nate raged. "I'm runnin' you in. For reckless drivin'. For—"

But he said no more, not for the moment. Because the stranger lashed out suddenly with his right fist and caught Nate squarely on the jaw.

The blow hurt. Nate staggered backward; almost lost his balance. But he managed to evade the left fist that the stranger threw.

"You big tub of lard!" the stranger yelled. He walked forward, his fists raised in front of him in a prizefighter's stance. "I'm the middleweight champ of the Eastern Seaboard. I'll rip yuh to shreds!"

Nate was big, but agile for a big man. He stepped aside when the stranger charged. Then he caught the stranger behind the ear with an open-handed blow that was strictly judo. "Meet the new champ!" Nate wheezed as the stranger toppled to the street.

The Easterner was unconscious, Nate saw; he grabbed him by the collar and dragged him back into the office.

He made certain that the Easterner was alive and breathing and had suffered no permanent injury from that cuff he had given him behind the ear.

The stranger was all right; Nate

dumped him in one of the two cells that were in the rear of the office. He made a search then of the stranger's pockets to satisfy himself that the man was carrying no deadly weapons other than his fists. He found a wallet, a handkerchief and some loose change. A driver's license in the wallet informed Nate the man was Lester Budnick, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Nate shoved the wallet back into Budnick's coat pocket, then removed Budnick's tie and belt—just in case the man might have suicidal tendencies. That was a precaution Nate took with all prisoners, because, he knew, there had been many cases where prisoners had hanged themselves with their belts or their ties when left alone in cells.

Budnick was stirring, groggily, on the cot when Nate locked the cell door. Nate threw Budnick's tie and belt on the rolltop desk, then made two telephone calls. One of the calls was to the Ajax Garage to tow Budnick's convertible off the street; the other was to Tully Jenkins, a retired peace officer who had been Nate's predecessor as deputy sheriff. Tully promised to come over and keep an eye on Budnick while Nate was away from his office.

Then Nate went outside and climbed into the jeep once more. He was mumbling blasphemy at the delay Budnick had caused him as he headed the jeep toward the late Spider Rayburn's farm.

- 2 -



DEPUTY SHERIFF
Nate Stone apologized to Corporal Timothy Meehan when he encountered the State Trooper on the ivy-clad front porch of the late Spider Rayburn's farm house. "Sorry I'm so slow in gettin'

here, but I had some business back in town before I could leave."

"That's okay, Nate," Meehan told him. Meehan was heavy-set six-footer in a neatly pressed slate gray uniform of the State Police. "Maybe I should have phoned you and saved you the trip out here; we still got a few loose ends to clear up but I think we got the killer."

"Yuh do!" Nate said; "that's fine." He was far from displeased because the case had, apparently, come to such an abrupt conclusion. In fact, he was overjoyed because it appeared as if he was going to be saved the trouble—and exercise—of taking part in what he had figured was going to be a long and tiresome murder investigation. "Who's the guilty party?"

"A guy named Derek Walters," Meehan told him. "A drifter from the west Coast. He's been working here on the farm as a hired hand. He admitted—under questioning—that he and Spider had an argument over some back wages and he gunned Spider down."

Nate nodded. "That figures; it could be true. I done tol' yuh already that Spider was a slow man with a dollar where his hired help was concerned. Where did yuh locate this Walters character?"

"In the barn out back; one of my boys found him sleeping off a jag in the hay loft. He surrendered without a struggle and confessed he did the deed. He says he was intoxicated when he killed Spider—so intoxicated, in fact, that he can't remember where he hid the gun. My boys got him out in the kitchen now, trying to help his memory. Want to talk to him?"

Nate shook his head. "That won't be necessary, I reckon. Your boys are probably better at questionin' a prisoner than I am." After all, he told himself inside, askin' questions could be heaps of trouble at times. Then he added, aloud, "Did yuh call the coroner yet, Corporal? We'll have to get his permis-

sion to remove the body. Where is the body, anyway?"

"In the parlor, Nate."

"In the parlor?" Nate repeated. That, for certain reasons, lessened his enthusiasm somewhat. "Does Walters say he killed him in the parlor?"

"He does, Nate."

NATE SHOOK his head, sadly. "Maybe I better talk to Walters after all."

"Why?" the Corporal wanted to know.

Nate shrugged his ponderous shoulders. "Nuthin' concrete yet, Corporal; I just got a hunch. Where is this Walters hombre? I want to talk to him."

"I said he was in the kitchen."

"Let's go then," Nate suggested, "to the kitchen."

"Okay," Meehan said. He started to open the front door of the farm house. "We'll go through the parlor. Spider's body's in there, like I said."

Nate shook his head. "No. Let's walk around the house to the kitchen. I'll talk to Walters first; then I'll take a look-see at the body—if I think it's necessary."

For a second or two, Meehan looked puzzled. "I don't get it, Nate," he began.

Nate smiled what he hoped was a disarming smile. "You kin handle the whole case, Corporal, if Walters is really the guilty party. If he is, there ain't no need for me to bother with the corpse at all."

"But Walters says he's guilty!" Meehan protested.

"We'll see!" Nate said.

"Howdy!" Nate greeted the State Troopers who were standing guard over Derek Walters. Then he added, "Howdy, Walters! When did you start workin' for Spider? I ain't seen you around these parts before."

"I started workin' fer him about a

week ago," Walters began as Nate studied him closely.

Derek Walters, Nate noted, was a frail old man—in sixties, at least. He had long gray hair and about a two-week's stubble of gray beard. He was dressed in faded overalls and a torn flannel shirt. He sat, hunched forward, in a wooden kitchen chair. He was wringing his skinny hands nervously; and he had a wild look, like a captured animal almost, in his washed-out gray eyes.

"A week ago, eh?" Nate repeated. "Reckon that's why I never seen yuh before. Where did yuh say yuh was from?"

Walters sighed heavily. "I'm from nowhere in particular. I was born on the West Coast, though. Frisco to be exact. I done a lot of travelin' in my time, though. Ain't got no regular home."

"I see," Nate said. "Just a drifter, eh?"

Walters sighed again. There was utter despair in his sigh; as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. "That's right. Just a drifter."

NATE MEDITATED a moment. It would be so easy, he told himself, to pin Spider's murder on this helpless old codger. It would save so much trouble—and exercise; and Nate hated exercise. But he had to convince himself the man was guilty.

"Go ahead, Walters." That was Meehan, stepping into the verbal breach that had been created by Nate's silence. "Tell the Deputy here how you gunned down Rayburn."

"Okay," Walters said. "There ain't much to tell. We had an argument—and I shot him. I was drinkin' at the time and I don't remember too much about it."

"But it was in the parlor?" Nate probed. "Yuh remember that much, don't yuh?"

Walters nodded. "That's right. I shot him in the parlor. I told him I was

quittin', that I wanted my pay and he wouldn't give it to me. So I shot him. I was drinkin' at the time; I was dead drunk. I don't remember much about it."

"And what did yuh get drunk on?" Nate wanted to know. "What was yuh drinkin'? Where did yuh get it?"

Walters' narrow brow wrinkled as he thought it over. "I was—I was drinkin' whiskey. That's it. Store bought whiskey—that's what it was! Store bought whiskey. The best whiskey I tasted in ages. Straight rye, I believe it was."

"He's correct there, Nate!" That was Meehan interrupting again. "Bottled in bond rye. He had the empty bottle with him when my boys found him in the hay loft. There's another empty quart bottle of the same stuff in the parlor on a table near Rayburn's body."

Nate nodded, but made no comment.

"And that's not all, Nate," Meehan went on. "We know Walters here was quarreling with Rayburn about his wages. Mrs. Peevey told us that."

"She did?" Nate asked. "And where is Mrs. Peevey now?"

"One of my boys drove her home," Meehan informed him. "She said she had work to do at home; besides, she was all shaken up from finding Rayburn's body and all. I got her statement and released her under her own reconnaissance." Then he added, warily. "I hope that was all right with you, Nate. I know you said to hold her till you got here; but I saw no harm in releasing her. Of course, I didn't give her permission to leave until Walters here confessed. I can send one of my boys after her again if you want to talk to her personally."

Nate shook his head. "That won't be necessary—I hope. Just tell me what she told you about this argument Walters had with Rayburn."

Meehan took a notebook from the

breast pocket of his uniform jacket, thumbed through some of the pages and said, "Here. This is it. Here's what she said, in part: '*I was here yesterday, April the 15th. I heard the hired hand, whom I now know as Derek Walters in an argument with the deceased Spider Rayburn. The argument was over wages. Walters told Rayburn he would kill him unless he got his pay and Rayburn told Walters he would wait until he was damn good and ready to give them to him. If Walters didn't like the arrangements, he could leave the premises immediately and he would mail the wages to him.*'"

"There's more, Nate," Meehan went on. "But that's the essential part of her story at that point. Mrs. Peevey said she came here yesterday to do some housework for Rayburn, and heard him quarreling with Walters here. She said she came here today to see about her own wages, and that's when she found the body. She also said—"

"Never mind that part," Nate interrupted. "But did she mention she cleaned the parlor—as part of her chores, I mean?"

MEEHAN considered the question a moment. Then: "I believe she did. As a matter of fact, I'm certain she did."

"Good!" Nate told him. "Now you again," he said as he turned back to Walters. "Where did you get that whiskey, Walters? This best whiskey you tasted in years? Where did you get it? Did you bring it to the farm when you came here? Did you get it from Spider? Or did you find it? Think hard, Walters! Your life might depend on your answer!"

Walters' narrow brow wrinkled again. Then he laughed; it was almost an insane chuckle. "I hardly brought it with me," he said. "Whiskey would never last a week with me. I said I was here a week. I'd hardly hold a bottle of whiskey a whole week without

drinkin' it. I love whiskey. That's my downfall!" His mood changed suddenly; and his voice was almost a sob. "I love whiskey! I love it! I have to have it! I have to—"

"Okay! Okay!" Nate cut in. "I believe yuh. Then yuh found the whiskey, didn't yuh?" he added. "Yuh found it, didn't yuh?"

Walters nodded. "Yeah. That's right. I found it. I remember now; I found it."

"And where did yuh find it?" Nate demanded. "In the parlor? That's where yuh found it, didn't yuh? In the parlor?"

"That's right!" Walters agreed. "In the parlor! That's right! I found it in the parlor!"

"And—" Nate pointed a warning finger at him. "And yuh ain't lyin'? About findin' the whiskey in the parlor, I mean. Don't lie about it! Your whole life depends on it. You ain't lyin'?"

"I ain't lyin'!" Walters insisted. "I remember real well now; I found it in the parlor."

"But it looks like," Nate went on, "that here were two bottles of rye in the parlor. How come yuh didn't take the other bottle out to the hayloft with yuh, Walters?"

"Why—why," Walters shot back, without any hesitation, "I didn't take the other bottle because it was empty."

"But why was it empty?" Nate wanted to know. "Did you drink that bottle, too?"

Walters shook his head. "I didn't!" he insisted; "not by a damn sight!"

"Then who drank it then?" Nate probed.

"I—I guess," Walters said, "I guess it was Spider himself and that other feller."

"What other feller?" Nate demanded.

"The feller that came visitin' Spider last evenin'."

Nate gave a self-congratulatory

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grunt. He knew, almost for certain now, that the questions with which he had pried Walters had not been in vain. Then he flashed a broad grin at Walters. "You're doin' fine now, old man," he commented. "Your brain's workin' real good." Then he added, "I want yuh to think real hard again, Walters. I want yuh to tell me where Spider was when you stole—er—I mean found that whiskey in the parlor."

"He was right there," Walters said. "Right there in the parlor; he was a-layin' on the floor—all daid and bloody."

"But you didn't kill him?" Nate demanded. "Or did you?"

Walters shook his head again. "No. I didn't kill him. It must have been that other feller. All I did was take that bottle of rye when—when—" he chuckled "when I saw Spider was too daid to stop me. But—"

"Nate! Nate!" That was Meehan cutting in again. "I don't see what you're driving at; Walters has already admitted he killed Spider. Why help him dream up this 'other feller' who probably only exists in his drunken imagination?"

Nate shook his head, a bit sadly. "I hate to contradict yuh, Corporal, since we're such good friends. But I don't think Walters here killed Spider; in fact, I'm almost sure he didn't."

Meehan looked perplexed. "But how, Nate," he begged, "how—in heaven's name—do you figure that out?"

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NATE SIGHED. "It's fairly simple, Corporal," he said. "All yuh gotta have is a knowledge of these backwoods characters like I have. I know you're city-bred, Corporal, so you wouldn't know.

"But," Nate went

on, "here in the brush country, folks don't use their parlors much. They keep them locked up, and only use them on special occasions—such as weddin's, and funerals, and maybe at Christmas time."

"Soon as yuh said Spider's body was found in his parlor, Corporal, I figured it couldn't have been a hired hand that done him in. Yuh see, hired hands ain't allowed in no parlors—except on very rare occasions. I knew Spider; I knew he wouldn't allow no hired drifter in his parlor—except maybe over his dead body."

"So I don't think," Nate continued, "that Walters here is our killer. It gotta be somebody else."

"But who?" Meehan asked, a bit sourly. He was, Nate figured, a trifle peeved because what had looked like a simple open-and-shut murder case was growing more complicated; and Nate didn't blame him a bit for his reaction. "Who could it be?"

Nate shook his head. "I got no idea yet. It could be Mrs. Peevey. She'd be allowed to be in the parlor—to clean it up, that is."

"But," he went on, "I don't think it was Mrs. Peevey—not now, any more."

"Why not?" Meehan wanted to know.

"Because it was probably this 'other feller' that Walters mentioned," Nate said.

"But, Nate," Meehan protested, "surely you don't believe his story about this other person. Walters here is confused. He sounds like—well—like a guy without all his buttons. He tells me one story; then he tells you another. I don't see what we can believe—when he tells it."

Nate nodded. "I'll admit he sounds confused. But I got a hunch this other feller he talked about really exists."

"Why, Nate? Why?"

"Well," Nate said, "in the first place, Spider had Mrs. Peevey clean up the parlor. That means he intended to use

it soon. And why would he want to use it? Because he was expectin' a visitor; that's why.

"And who would be the visitor?" Nate went on. "It had to be somebody important—important to Spider, that is. So it wouldn't be anybody from the County. But—but it *could* be somebody from the East! Spider made trips to the East—lots of times. Spider—years ago—boxed in the East. In late years, he used to go there to meet some of his old sparrin' partners and such and—" Nate broke off suddenly in the middle of the sentence. "Hell!" he ejaculated. "This might be simple yet!"

Nate turned to Meehan again. "Look, Corporal, do me a favor, will yuh? Have your boys search the house for Spider's letters; letters received, that is. What I want to find out is whether Spider got a letter from a Lester Budnick, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, tellin' Nate that this Lester was comin' here to visit him. In the meantime, I'll call the Pittsburgh police and see if the guy got a record there."

Meehan nodded. "Will do, Nate."

And Nate went over to the old-fashioned battery powered telephone that hung on the kitchen wall.

NATE CRANCHED the handle on the phone. When he contacted the exchange in Toddville, he asked for long distance. "I want to get in touch with Police Headquarters in Pittsburgh," he explained.

Meanwhile, a couple of Meehan's subordinates started to search the house for letters.

Deputy Sheriff Nate Stone identified himself to a Captain Rourk who answered the long distance call in Pittsburgh. "I'd like to have," he told Rourk, "some information on a Lester Budnick, who hails from your community, I believe. He calls himself the middleweight champ of the Eastern Seaboard; got any record on a character like that?"

"Do we!" Rourk ejaculated. "I'll say we do. I know that mugg personally; in fact, I had the dubious distinction of arresting him myself a couple of times. Right now, he's wanted here for automobile theft. He stole a convertible owned by a fight promoter who's a personal friend of mine.

"Yes, sir, Deputy, we got a record on Lester Budnick, who's known in fight circles here as 'Slasher' Budnick. But as for him being a champ—well—he's never been anything like a champ, even though he did do some prize-fighting now and then. He's nothing but a hood; a cheap second-rate hood. He's had one conviction for armed robbery already—served years for that as I remember.

"But watch him, Deputy, he's a cop-fighter and a cop-hater. When he's drinking, he's dangerous; and he may be carrying a gun. Watch him carefully, if you try to take him into custody."

"I got him in custody already," Nate informed Rourk.

"Then hold him for us, Deputy; we want him for stealing that convertible."

"Don't worry!" Nate promised. "I'll hold him."

Nate had a couple more questions.

"Did you, Captain," he asked Rourk, "ever hear of a box-fighter named Spider Rayburn? He's from out in these parts but he fought in the East about thirty years or so ago."

There was a pause for a moment or two while Rourk apparently thought it over. "Yes, I believe I do," he said, finally. "You're lucky, Deputy, that you caught me here in my office, because I've been a fight fan from way back. Yes, I remember Spider Rayburn; he was quite a scrapper back in the old days. In fact, I saw him around here in Pittsburgh once or twice in recent years. He was quite a spender, I hear. He'd blow into town and throw money around like a drunken sailor."

THAT DIDN'T sound like Spider Rayburn, Nate told himself. Not

the Spider Rayburn he knew; because Spider was certainly as stingy as a miser with his moola around Toddville. But the hombre could have a sort of Doctor Jekyll—Mister Hyde complex. He could be a miser in the West; but a heavy spender in the East. People could be like that, Nate reminded himself.

"I got one more question to ask," Nate told Rourk. "Were Spider and Budnick friends back there in Pittsburgh?"

Another pause on the wire. Then Rourk said, "I'm sorry, Deputy, but I can't help you out—for certain—with that. There is a possibility, though. Spider, I hear, spent most of his money buying whiskey for the fight crowd. He might have bumped into Budnick on one of his sprees. Sorry I can't give you a more definite answer on that."

"That's okay," Nate said. "Yuh helped me out plenty already."

Nate thanked Captain Rourk and replaced the telephone receiver back on the hook. Then he turned to Meehan. "Your boys have any luck with letters from Pittsburgh?"

Meehan shook his head. "Not yet; but they're still looking."

That was a bit of a disappointment, Nate admitted to himself. But, still, his luck was all good so far, he had to admit.

So he went back to Walters again. "Think carefully," he told Walters. Then: "Did you see this feller that came to visit Spider last night?"

Walters nodded. "I did."

"What did he look like?" Nate wanted to know. He waited, impatiently, while Walters mulled over his answer in his brain. So much depended on Walters' reply, Nate told himself. The whole case maybe.

And he was almost ready to kiss Walters when the drifter finally did start to describe the visitor.

"He was drivin' a big yeller auto," Walters began. "He was dressed kinda crazy, too. He wore a pink shirt—

somethin' I never saw on a man before. It was a shade a female might wear. A pink shirt and a dark suit—that's what he wore. He had dark hair and—"

"That'll do," Nate cut in, "for the present. Do you think you'd recognize him if you saw him again?"

"I reckon I would," Walters said.

"That's fine!" Nate told him. Then to Meehan: "Come on, Corporal. We're goin' into Toddville. I want Walters here to take a look at an Easterner. You can ride in my jeep with Walters and me. I'll explain the situation to yuh as it stands while we're drivin' over there."

"DID HE GIVE YUH ANY TROUBLE?"

Deputy Sheriff Nate Stone asked Tully Jenkins when he waddled into his office in Toddville with Corporal Timothy Meehan and Derek Walters, the drifter, trailing in his wake.

Tully grinned. He was a mild-looking little man with a wrinkled, leathery face and starkly blue eyes. His black serge suit, his white shirt, his black string tie and his wide-brimmed stetson, which was also black, were all spotless and immaculate. He appeared as gentle as a little lamb, Nate reflected; it was hard to believe that Tully was, in his younger days, one of the most feared peace officers in the whole State; he had been that fast with a six-shooter.

"No trouble at all, Nate," Tully said. "'Course, he's been bellowin' a bit—mostly for whiskey. Appears like he got a kingsize hangover. But I've been keepin' him locked up like I figured you'd want me to."

"Thanks, Tully," Nate said. He felt like offering the former lawman a few dollars for his trouble, but he knew Tully would be too proud to accept it; and it would probably offend him, anyway. "You're been a big help."

Nate was going to say more. But a loud yell from the cells in the rear prevented that. "Hey, you! You big tub of lard!" Lester Budnick raged at

Nate. "You locked me up! Now let me outta this crummy stir."

"Shut up!" Nate told him. "I'll let yuh out when I'm good and ready."

"That better be soon!" Budnick threatened. "I got big connections back East. Let me outta here and I'll rip yuh to shreds. I'm the middleweight champ of the Eastern Seaboard. I'm—"

"And I'm the new champ," Nate mocked him; "remember that little tussle outside?"

"Yuh hit me a foul!" Budnick raged. "Yuh hit me below the belt, yuh big tub of lard. Let me out! Fight fair and I'll rip yuh to shreds."

"Shut up!" This time Nate roared. "Or I will let yuh out—and really go to work on yuh!"

Budnick blued the air with profanity. Then: "Okay, let me out. I'll pay my fine and get outta this crummy burg. I got big business back East; I can't hang around this hick town all my life."

Nate shook his head, sadly. "When I'm finished with yuh, mister, yuh might wish you could stay in that nice cozy cell all your life."

"What d'yuh mean?" Budnick demanded.

"You'll see!" Nate promised, grimly. Then he turned his back on Budnick and confronted Walters. "That him?" Nate asked the drifter. "That the visitor Spider had last night? Take a good look at him and make sure."

Walters walked closer to the cell with a long, crane-like stride that was almost a shuffle. He peered in at Budnick. "That's him all right," Walters told Nate.

"Okay, Walters," Nate urged. "Give us the whole story again—right from the beginnin' and make sure that punch-drunk hood hears yuh."

WALTERS cleared his throat. Then: "This feller here," he began, "drove up to the farm last night about sundown in a big yellin' auto. Him and Spider had chicken for sup-

per. I know because I killed two chickens for Spider for to make the meal.

"A while afterward, I was out in the bunkhouse where Spider left his hired help sleep and I heard this feller and Spider talkin'. The winder was part-way open, so I could hear them talkin'—but I couldn't make out the words. Not at first, that is.

"I figured they was drinkin' because I saw Spider totin' two bottles of whiskey into the parlor when I took some kindlin' wood in for the kitchen fire a little whiles before.

"I was layin' there in my bunk wishin' I had some of that whiskey, too. Then I heard Spider and this feller here start to argue real loud. The argument got louder and louder. Then finally I heard a couple of shots go off.

"A short while later, I saw this feller go runnin' out the front of the house and jump in that big yellin' car. He looked like he was drunk because he was staggerin' all over the place. Then he drove away.

"So I went into investigate. I saw Spider all bloody on the floor. And—and—" he paused for breath. "And then I saw the whiskey.

"I was mighty thirsty," Walters went on; in a tone that was filled with apology. "I hadn't had a drop of hooch for nigh onto two weeks. I saw one bottle was empty; but the other one was nearly full.

"I was all shook up—what with seein' Spider's daid body and all—so I took a drink to steady my nerves. I intended to call the police and tell them what I saw.

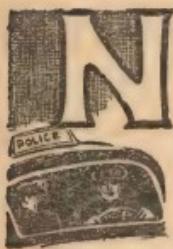
"But that one drink started me off. I must have downed about half the bottle before I thought about hidin'. I was a-scared this feller might come back, see me and gun me down, too. So I took the bottle with me and went out in the hayloft. Then, I reckon, I fell asleep.

"I slept until these fellers," he nodded toward Meehan, "come and waked me up. They asked me did I kill Spider and I told them 'yes.' But I was still

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feelin' the effects of that whiskey. I didn't know rightly what I was sayin'. I couldn't remember whether it was me or somebody else that killed Spider. But I know—now—that it must have been this feller here. He was alone with Spider and they was drinkin'. There was a couple of shots and he came runnin' out. He must have been the one that gunned down Spider."

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NATE TURNED to Budnick. "You heard that, didn't you?" he asked. "This feller says you killed Spider."

Budnick mouthed more blasphemy. His eyes were still glassy but his puffed white face was twisted into a scowl of rage. "Oh, how I hate all coppers!" he ranted. "And all stoolie-pigeons! I hope every copper and stoolie-pigeon alive rots in Hell! Yes!" he yelled. "I heard him. But that don't mean nuthin'. He's lyin'! I don't know nobody named Spider. I'm innocent; I didn't kill nobody. I was just passin' through this lousy burg when—"

"Shut up!" This time it was Meehan who roared at him. "Shut up! you'll have your chance to talk when you face a judge and jury."

"I won't!" Budnick yelled. "I'll never talk! I'll never rat on myself. I'll—"

"Let him rave!" Nate cut in. "We'll get enough proof. He won't have to talk." Then he walked toward the phone on the desk. "I almost forgot somethin'," he said. "The gun; it ain't never been found. Maybe it's in the convertible." He lifted the phone and called the Ajax Garage.

"Listen, Johnnie," Nate told Johnnie Wilson, an attendant at the garage, when the latter answered the phone. "Look around that convertible I had yuh tow away. See if there's a gun in

it. Look on the floor, under the seat and in the glove compartment. If yuh find one, don't touch it any more than yuh have to because yuh might mess up some finger prints—but see if it's been fired."

"Okay, Nate," Johnnie said. "You gonna hang on the phone?"

"I'll hang on."

"Then I'll look—right away."

IN A FEW minutes, Johnnie was back on the phone; and he sounded breathless with excitement. "There's a gun all right, Nate! Looks like a thirty-two Smith and Wesson revolver. It's in the glove compartment. I didn't touch it, but I smelled it; it smells like it's been fired recent."

"Good boy, Johnnie!" Nate said. "Remind me to buy yuh a couple of beers next time I see yuh." Then: "Just let the gun set where it is. I'll be over for it soon as I find time. And thanks."

"That's okay," Johnnie told him. "Glad to be of service."

Nate turned on Budnick once more. "We found the gun, Budnick. Now we can put the squeeze play on yuh two ways."

"How?" Budnick mocked.

"Well, first of all," Nate said, "we got Walters here; he's an eyeball witness."

"Yeah?" Budnick's voice was mocking again. "Did he see me bump off this Spider guy which I say I don't know from Adam? Did he see me bump him off?"

"No," Nate admitted, "but he saw you in the house; he kin put you at the scene."

"Says who?" demanded Budnick. "It's strictly his word against mine. He says I was in the house; I say I wasn't. That makes us even. The guy says he was drunk. He says he ain't even sure that he didn't bump off this Spider mugg himself. It's my word against this drunken stumblebum. Yuh don't win there; yuh sure don't. I ain't no dimwit. I kin talk as long and as loud

as this stumblebum. I say I wasn't in the house."

"But the gun," Nate reminded. "The gun. We have that now. All we have to do is fire some slugs from that gun into some cotton waste and prove they match the slugs in Spider's body. That proves Spider was killed with your gun."

"Yeh?" Budnick taunted. "Who says I own that gun? You kin say I do, but I kin say I don't. I ain't seen that car for hours. I'll say one of you hicks killed this Spider guy with that gun and then planted it in the glove compartment of the convertible. I've been locked up here for hours. You could have done a lot to the car in that time. Hell, you had time to give it a paint job even if yuh wanted to."

He paused a moment. Then went on: "Just for the record, I'll repeat myself. I don't own that gun; I don't know anybody named Spider; I was never in his house. Figure out some new angle, yuh bunch of yokels. You ain't gettin' noplace nohow."

Nate mulled it over in his mind while he tried to come up with some new form of evidence. Budnick, he had to admit, was a right deal smarter than he figured; Budnick, obviously, was no sucker. He had tangled with the Law before, and he had grown wise in the process. Then Stone thought of something.

He went back to the phone. He called the exchange and asked for the late Spider Rayburn's farm. He hoped, almost fervently, that at least one of Meehan's men was still there.

He sighed with relief when a gruff voice answered the phone and said, "Private Tompkins speakin'?"

"Howdy, Tompkins!" Nate greeted. "This is Nate Stone; find any letters from Pittsburgh yet?"

Tompkins first answer was disappointing. "No, Nate. No letters from Pittsburgh." But then the State Trooper added: "We did find somethin' else, though, Nate. It's a telegram."

"Read it!" Nate implored.

"Okay, Nate. Here it is. It was sent from Kansas City, Missouri, and it's addressed to 'Spider Rayburn, Toddville, R. D.' It says: '*Am on my way to California. Will be in your neck of the woods on Thursday. Will stop in and see you. Be at home.*' It's signed: 'Slasher Budnick.'"

"Thanks!" Nate ejaculated. "Thanks! You're a credit to the State Police."

Then he wheeled on Budnick again. "The rope's just as good as around your neck, Budnick. You made one slip you can't lie out of; you sent Spider a telegram. You said you'd see him Thursday. Yesterday was Thursday. The telegram proves you knew Spider. Let's see you alibi that!"

BUDNICK dropped back on the cot in his cell. He buried his face in hands. "Okay," he said. "It looks like yuh got me down for the count; I ain't got no alibi for that."

"Then you killed Spider?" Nate demanded.

Budnick bowed his head. "Okay; I killed him. But it wasn't premeditated. You can't pin no first degree murder rap on me." Then he asked, with a sort of dread, "What's the penalty for murder in this State?"

"The rope," Nate told him, coldly.

"Cripes!" The word, as Budnick uttered it, was half blasphemy and half a moan of despair. He put one hand to his neck like he was feeling the noose already. "What a stinkin' way to cash in! We ain't that cruel back in Pennsylvania; we use the hot seat."

"It's all a matter of geography," Nate commented. "We're still old-fashioned here. We just ain't got around to employin' electric chairs yet. We still use a rope."

"Don't mention that word!" Budnick ranted. "Don't mention rope! I don't like it!" Then he added, with a pleading in his voice: "Look. I'll make a deal with youse guys; I'll talk if yuh agree to give me a break."

Nate shook his head, sadly. "No deals, mister. I can't promise yuh nuthin'. Just tell the truth; we'll decide whether yuh deserve the rope or not."

"Okay," Budnick said. "I'll tell the truth—the whole works. I admit I killed Spider, but it wasn't premeditated. I was drunk at the time. I didn't come here to kill him."

"Then why did you come here?" Nate wanted to know.

"Well," Budnick began, "to begin with, that convertible's hot. I stole it in Pittsburgh from a fight promoter. I was out on the West Coast durin' World War Two and I figured usin' that convertible to get me back there again.

"But I know transportin' a stolen car across a state line is a Federal rap; so I wanted to ditch the car. I was afraid of gettin' picked up drivin' it.

"But then I thought of Spider. I met him in Pittsburgh a few times and I figured he was loaded with dough. So I came here, figurin' on sellin' the car to Spider. That way, I would kill two birds with one rock—like the sayin' goes. I needed money and I had to get rid of the car.

SPIDER'S home was on the route I figured on usin' to get to the Coast, so it all looked simple to me. I stopped off and sent that crummy telegram to Spider tellin' him I was comin' to see him. Just to make sure he'd be at home.

"So I comes on here and finds out where Spider lives. I drive up to his house and he treats me swell; he feeds me a good chicken dinner, which I ain't eaten in a long time, and starts to give me a skin full of grog.

"But when I mention sellin' him the convertible, he balks. He says it's too fancy for his neck of the woods, which is probably the truth. But that don't fit in with my plans. I want to sell Spider the car to get rid of it and as a means of addin' to my financial resources.

"But Spider, like I said, gives me a



negative answer. He don't want the car. I try to persuade him. But he still says: 'No.' We start to argue about it. By this time, we had consumed nearly a full quart of grog and I am gettin' a little potted. Our argument gets hot and heavy. And, like I said, I am gettin' woozy from too much giggle-water. So I takes out my rod, which I had handy in my pocket, and tries to frighten him into lettin' me unload the hot convertible on him for a large cash consideration.

"But he has the booze in him, too—enough booze, I guess, to make him very brave. We argue some more; and, then, to make a long story short, I get ravin' mad—just like a maniac. I wind up by lettin' him have two slugs right in the gut before I realize, fully, what I am doing.

"When Spider falls over to the floor, I decide my best bet is to get to the Coast as fast as I can—whether it is in a hot convertible or not. My only idea is to get miles and miles away from the scene.

"So I start to drive away. But I am so soused up I can't drive right. After narrowly missing two telephones poles, I decide to pull over to the side of the road until I sober up somewhat. I had sense enough to park the car off the road behind some bushes where no passing drivers would see me. I woke up this mornin', still groggy from booze and with a splittin' headache and a hangover.

"So I started out again. This time, I told myself, I wasn't going to stop until I hit the Coast. But luck was against me. I was drivin' through this hick burg when a jeep pulls out in front of

me; and who should be drivin' but the local Wyatt Earp."

Budnick paused a moment. Then he looked toward Nate. "You can take charge of the story from here on in, I guess."

Nate nodded. "I reckon I kin." Then to Meehan, who had been taking down Budnick's statement in shorthand in his notebook, he added: "Got it all, Corporal?"

"I got enough," Meehan said.

"Then he's all yours," Nate told him.

A COUPLE of State Troopers were loading Lester Budnick, who was handcuffed now, into a chocolate-hued State Police car to transport him over to the County Seat when Corporal Timothy Meehan turned to Deputy Sheriff Nate Stone and said, "You did it all, Nate; I have to admit you did it all."

Nate shook his head. "We all did our part, Corporal. Where would we be if Tomkins didn't find that telegram?"

Meehaa grinned. "And where would we be if you didn't know all about parlors in the backwoods country?"

Nate shrugged his shoulders. "That was a help, I reckon." Then he grinned, too. "Yuh know, Corporal, this whole case had an odd angle."

"How so, Nate?"

"Well, Spider got killed in his parlor. Remember the old nursery rhyme?"

Meehan nodded. "You mean that one that goes: 'Won't you step into my parlor? said the spider to the fly? You mean that one, Nate?"

"I do."

"But that time," Meehan reminded, "the spider invited the fly into his parlor; and then killed the fly. The spider was the killer then."

"That's right," Nate said. "This time, the story got a twist; this time, the Spider invited the killer into his parlor. Too bad Budnick's not a fly-weight instead of a middleweight. Then we'd really have a yarn, Corporal."



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It didn't seem possible that a cunning old hand like Snooky Snead could blow himself up accidentally. Suicide was more likely. But the birds had a simple answer to the problem . . .



DEATH OF A PAMPERED PIGEON

Sergeant Oliver Story

by DENNIS WIEGAND

LIUTENANT Emmett Corcoran said sourly, "Oliver, you're a guy who seems to like seeing blood and gore spread around all over the place, so you might as well take this assignment."

"What assignment?" queried Police Sergeant Ralph Oliver hopefully. Ever since a special narcotics detail had withered away under the heat of newspaper blasts against "police brutality" in the handling of hopped-up punks, Sergeant Oliver had been holding the short end of the stick on duty.

Perhaps, he thought, this would be his chance to get away for awhile from investigating the theft of small change from milk bottles on doorsteps, and checking on the uniformed foot patrolmen.

"Snooky Snead," explained the Lieutenant, "has blown himself up."

"I don't believe it," Oliver stated flatly, forgetting for the moment where he was.

"No?" said the Lieutenant, his voice tight and hard. "Well, you can go over to his place and see for yourself. Happ-

ened on the roof. Bomb Squad experts from downtown are already there. Even if it is a waste of time, Snooky lived in this precinct, and we'll want to be represented by more than just the uniformed men on cruiser duty."

Sergeant Oliver's memory flipped through the mental rogues' gallery of the precinct—that encyclopedic knowledge of his particular corner of the underworld.

Snooky Snead had been five-feet-two; sparse sandy hair; aged thirty-six, but looked older or younger according to circumstances. He had tight, shiny skin stretched over bones which seemed to have more angular joints than rounded ones. Tiny, pale-blue eyes helped to give him a skeletal look that made it very easy to spot him when a general pickup order was out.

But despite the great and frequent inconvenience that general pickup orders had caused Mr. Snead, the police very rarely troubled him on his own account. This was solely because Mr. Snead was such a very smooth operator that, when he blew a safe—so the story

went—a cat sleeping on top of it wouldn't wake up. And if he did, no doubt Snooky would have a bottle of milk handy to shut him up. Snooky was a peteman, of the old school, but one of the very few who knew enough not to tell tales out of school.

"Well, Sergeant," Lieutenant Corcoran snapped, "hadn't you better be on your way?"

"Yes, sir," said Oliver, starting absentmindedly toward the door of the Lieutenant's office.

"Maybe it'll help you shake the lead out," suggested Corcoran sarcastically, "if I tell you that Policewoman Sally Ryan is going along with you to look after Snooky's mother."

"His mother? I always thought that guy had come into the world by blasting his way out of a stainless steel egg," said Oliver lightly. But he hadn't missed the menacing envy in the tone of the Lieutenant's voice. Emmett Corcoran was not only his immediate superior, but also his chief rival for the exclusive attentions of Policewoman Sally Ryan. Although Ralph Oliver seemed to have the edge with Sally most of the time, he could never be sure about it.

Something in Corcoran's manner told Sergeant Oliver that he was hoping that, somehow or other, Oliver would manage to bollix up this simple, routine business of standing around watching the Bomb Squad experts work. Hoping that maybe Oliver would haul off and slug someone when it wasn't really necessary. This, of course, would cause Miss Ryan to think more highly of Emmett Corcoran and the finer things of life...like going to the Opera, and acting like a lawyer instead of a copper.

"WELL, HELLO, Buster," said

Sally warmly when he climbed into the police sedan beside her. She tossed him a smile that warmed up the cold black leather upholstery of the squad car. They sat in the rear seat together while a uniformed officer

drove the car. It always made Sergeant Oliver vaguely uncomfortable when Sally rode in the back of a squad car. He didn't like to admit to himself that she looked as if she were in custody, rather than on duty, with that bright blonde hair, lush build, and hardboiled manner.

"Get that look out of your eye," she ordered. "I can tell what you're thinking; remember Carney and Evans."

Carney and Evans were two former squad car Romeos who had been dismissed from the service. Sally, acting as a decoy, had filed a complaint charging the two Don Juans with picking up more floozies for themselves than for the courts. The fact that Captain Patrick A. Ryan, the Precinct Commander, was Sally's father had robbed of its full effect their plea that, "You wouldn't take the word of some little blonde chippy against ours, would you, Captain?"

"Don't worry," laughed Oliver, "I'd swear that I'd made an honest woman of you. Then, when your Old Man found out we weren't really married, he'd be so relieved he'd forget the whole thing."

"That's not fair to our beloved boss," protested Sally. "Daddy doesn't dislike you; in fact he thinks you're a first-class cop. It's just that he thinks that Emmett will live a lot longer than you will."

"Back in the Army," sighed Oliver, "there wasn't anything more expendable than Lieutenants."

"Don't worry, Buster," she said, patting the back of his hand, "maybe the spring on Emmett's swivel chair will give way some day when he's leaning back to get a longer swing on a tongue-lashing."

The squad car eased slowly through a throng of kids to a berth at the curb, already lined with police cars, in front of a run-down block of brick tenements.

Sergeant Oliver and Sally pushed their way through to the scarred and

weather-beaten door, flashed their credentials to the officer on duty there, and began the ascent of the rickety, barren staircase. A piercing yowl, and a couple of very dramatic sobs, from behind a door to the right of the top-floor landing told Sally that her job wasn't going to be an easy one.

"Don't bother knocking," Oliver advised her. "Nelly always gets upset when anyone knocks on the door; thinks it's the cops. Her friends don't knock."

"Poor thing," murmured Sally sympathetically.

"Haw," said Oliver. "Just try taking away her bottle if you want to hear some *real* grief out of Nelly."

Leaving Sally to her job of soothing the victim's mother, Sergeant Oliver mounted the narrow, ladder-like flight to the gravelled roof of the tenement building.

As Lieutenant Corcoran had predicted, the scene was a messy one—what little he could see of it through the forest of sturdy police legs. Most of the blast damage had been to the chest and forearms, he saw, when he had insinuated himself into the inner circle.

"Finally got here, Oliver," grunted Sergeant Len Kiley, assigned to the Bomb Squad at downtown headquarters.

"We had to take a vote," said Oliver, "to see who got this juicy job."

"Juicy is right," agreed Kiley. "You can spit out them words again."

A Deputy Medical Examiner was kneeling by the shattered body, diffidently probing the damaged chest. "You're the precinct officer in charge?" he quizzed, looking up from his grisly work.

"Yep," admitted Oliver. "Detective Sergeant Ralph Oliver."

"Identify this man?" queried the Deputy Examiner.

"Sure, I'd know that face anywhere," said Ralph Oliver. "There's nothing

wrong with it that bomb wouldn't have cured, if it had been a little higher."

"Cut the comedy," advised the M.E. "You confirm that this is Cartwright Watson Carmichael Sneed?"

"That's Snooky, sure enough," conceded Sergeant Oliver. "His mother wasn't altogether sure what his last name really was, so she gave him a couple of extras to fall back on in an emergency."

THE DEPUTY M. E. rose to his feet, dusting off the knees of his trousers. Holding a pad of blank forms against the column of a chimney he scrawled out a removal permit. Together with a small white envelope, he handed the slip of paper to the bomb expert. Sergeant Kiley opened the envelope and shook out a few shiny scraps of aluminum.

"Holy Cow!" he said. "If these are the biggest pieces of the bomb casing, we'll never be able to reconstruct the original form."

"Must have been nitro," suggested one of his aides.

"He'd have that on hand, all right," supplied Oliver, feeling a little out of things. "He was a sort of technical consultant on crib-cracking."

"We know," snorted Kiley. "Must have checked fifty or sixty samples of his handiwork myself. The stuff's tricky—but I never figured Snooky would get hooked by it; he was pretty darn careful."

"Well, suicide or misadventure, it's all the same to me," commented the Medical Examiner. "All I ask is that you make up your minds as soon as possible so that I can file the death certificate."

"Let you know tomorrow, Doc," Kiley promised. "I kinda favor suicide myself, offhand; 'course anybody can make a mistake with nitro."

The doctor finished packing up his bag, and disappeared down the stair hatch. Two hospital orderlies in white

coats clambered up with a stretcher and a couple of coils of rope, and began to pack up the somewhat scattered remains in a strip of tarpaulin.

"Not much to work on, Slim," Kiley told one of his aides. "I guess most of the fragments are in him; but you three better scatter and go over this roof with a fine comb."

"Bet a couple of those midget chickens'd go good in the old lunch bucket," commented the man called Slim, indicating the pigeon loft erected off toward a corner of the roof.

Sergeant Oliver strolled casually over to the wire-mesh pen and stood inspecting the brown, gray and white pigeons, which were now cooing and waddling about as if there'd been no explosion. Inside a mesh enclosure, measuring about ten feet by ten, were a couple of barrels mounted on wooden legs. The barrels had been honey-combed with large holes and wooden perches bristled out beneath each hole. Inside some of the holes tiny, bright eyes pinpointed the sunlight.

"Can you figure a guy like Snooky, with all his dough, running a chicken farm on the roof? Or livin' in a dump like this, for that matter?" Sergeant Kiley wandered over to stand beside the precinct detective.

"These guys don't wind up with a very big net on what they take," Oliver explained. "What with mouthpieces, splits with the gang, cars, illegal equipment at high cost, and the rest of it, they don't make out too well. Especially since you can't pull a job every day, nor even every month; not in Snooky's league, anyhow."

"Stop it," begged Kiley, "You'll have me takin' up a collection amongst the boys at headquarters to bury the poor guy. No wonder he went in for apartment house poultry."

"Don't be a dope, Kiley; Snooky didn't raise these to eat," countered Sergeant Oliver. "These are homing pigeons. Guys raise them to race, or to

carry messages. Snooky was mighty soft on these birds; guess it was the only love he ever gave, or ever got."

"Now don't go soft on me, Bud," urged Kiley, watching his men mark off the roof into squares with chalk for the search.

"I'm not kidding," Oliver told him. "Only once did Snooky ever use any of his birds in crime. Worked, too; saved his neck. But nevertheless, he never did it again. Some idea about the birds being able to live clean, even if he couldn't."

THREE BOMB SQUAD men were on hands and knees, marking off each square as they finished sifting the pebbles, searching for any particles of the bomb, mechanism, or container.

"Yeah?" said Kiley, interested. "How'd he figure an angle to use a pigeon in a crime?"

"It was during that Korloffsky gem theft deal—long before my time on the detective squad," explained the precinct detective. "Snooky blew a wall-safe in an apartment house in broad daylight. There were four of them and they split the stuff right there. Nobody had more than a handful to carry... but what a handful!"

"I remember the Korloffsky deal," broke in Kiley. "A sweet job of blastin'; but the jolt shorted a wire in the house telephone system. The boys was swarmin' all over the joint; picked 'em all up with the goods."

"All except Snooky," Oliver assured him. "He was clean when they shook him down, so he got off. What they figured out later was that he'd taken a pigeon along with him. He'd stashed his share of the loot into a capsule attached to the bird's leg and tossed him out the window of the apartment."

"Hey, that's pretty cute," admired Kiley; "I didn't hear about that. All he had to do was come back here and collect the swag from the pigeon, hunh?"

"Right," agreed Oliver. "And by the time anybody thought to wonder about what he'd carried in the lunch bucket he had with him, it was too late to prove anything. There was no publicity on the gimmick, because we were hoping he'd try to pull it again; but he never did."

"Well," said the explosives expert almost regretfully, "Snooky was a mighty good man in his way; a real craftsman. That's why I figure he blew himself up on purpose."

"Guys who're really hepped on some hobby like this seldom kill themselves," observed Oliver, doubtfully. "He could have had a tube of the stuff in his vest pocket, or something."

"Well, if we don't find some trace of a detonating device," conceded Kiley, "we'll have to call it an accident. But the insurance company won't like it—specially since all you have to do with that stuff is look at it crosseyed to make it go off."

One of the men searching the roof came over to Kiley, holding forth a couple of envelopes marked with numbers to correspond with the squares chalked on the roof.

"Here's a bit of brass that swivels on a brass pin," he announced. "Not much doubt about it's being part of a tripping device."

"That makes it suicide," declared Kiley.

"I'd better get downstairs and talk to Nelly," put in Sergeant Oliver; "I guess it's my job to try to establish some sort of motive for suicide."

"In this other envelope," continued Kiley's assistant, "are some pigeon parts."

"So what?" growled Kiley. "The joint's practically paved with pigeon feathers."

"I don't know," shrugged the aide. "I'm just telling you that I've found some claws and a pigeon's beak. Guess he took his favorite with him."

WHEN SERGEANT OLIVER walked into the grubby, grease-stained Sneed flat to seek clues to the terrible despondency that had caused Snooky Sneed to take his own life, he came upon a scene of almost girlish gaiety.

The bright blonde Sally and the straggled-gray and grizzled Nelly were chattering away like a couple of sorority girls discussing Prom dates. Nelly lovingly lifted an almost full bottle of bourbon from the threadbare carpet and saluted the detective with the upended bottom of it. A gurgle and a sigh later she continued her tender reminiscences of the childhood of Cartwright Watson Carmichael Sneed.

"...as I was sayin', right from the start he was such a good boy, my Snooky. Always brought everything he swiped right home to his mother."

"Mrs. Sneed is feeling much better now, Sergeant," Sally needlessly informed him.

"So I see," said Ralph.

"Sergeant?" exclaimed the old haridan. "Sergeant, did you say? A copper! Get him out of here; drivin' my poor boy to his death, and me to drink!"

"It's all right, Mrs. Sneed," Sally soothed her. "Sergeant Oliver is a good friend of mine."

"Oh, so this is that copper boy friend of yours you been tellin' me about?" said Nelly in a calmer tone. "Well, I don't hold with no nice young kid like you goin' around with cops; but if you like him, Dearie, I guess he can stay."

"How're you fixed for dough, Nelly?" queried Oliver. This is no Treasury Department snooping; I just want to know how you're going to get along."

Sergeant Oliver made a mental note that Nelly Sneed been swimming upstream against a river of whiskey for too many years to be able to make a living in the simple, unimaginative, and illegal ways she'd always followed. Might as well see if he couldn't get her

fixed up with some sort of welfare allowance. Maybe society owed Nelly more than it knew; anyhow, she had to be taken care of.

"Oh, Mrs. Sneed has just been telling me how thoughtful her boy had been about insurance," Sally interposed. "He left her well fixed."

"Guess again," returned Oliver. "It's tough, but the boys in the Bomb Squad are going to certify this as a suicide. Can't collect insurance."

"Suicide!" spat Nelly contemptuously. "They're nuts! Oh, I know you cops—pull a frame up on Snooky even after he's dead. But he fooled you. You'll never touch the stuff from the Carstairs job!"

Suddenly she realized that she'd been running off at the mouth far too much. But it wasn't soon enough; she smirked fatuously and brought up the bottle for a consolatory swig.

"Well, well," said the detective triumphantly, "so Snooky was in on that caper? Almost a quarter of a million bucks. A lot of it in new bills with recorded serial numbers. They're figuring downtown that it was a high class amateur job because none of the stuff has turned up, and none of the regulars has been seen grand-standing around the bars."

"Now, Ralph," cooed Sally, "don't be such a bad boy. Can't you see that poor Mrs. Sneed is griefstricken and doesn't know what she's saying. Poor dear! You let her alone now."

"Hunh?" Oliver was astounded by this swift shift in tactics. "Oh, sure, sure, Sally," he agreed hastily; "I didn't mean anything. Poor Snooky is gone now, anyhow. I'm sorry, Nelly."

"That's okay," grudged Nelly. "You're just a copper; can't help it."

She awarded herself a bonus from the rapidly-dwindling bottle.

"Come on," said Sally in her sweetest manner. "Let's go back to work and leave poor Mrs. Sneed to her memories. We'll stop at the liquor store down the

street and have them send up another bottle. Mrs. Sneed doesn't have a telephone."

"Glad to," said Oliver heartily. "But before we go, Nelly, I wonder if you'd hunt up that old lunch bucket Snooky used to carry his birds around in. Kind of like it as a souvenir of Snooky."

"Take it and welcome," Nelly waved indifferently. "It's on the floor behind that chair over there."

SERGEANT OLIVER retrieved a scratched and worn tin lunch bucket from behind the indicated chair. It was of a standard pattern, with its lid arched to supply a place for a thermos bottle. But one end had been cut out and the tin replaced with a pane of screening soldered and riveted over the opening.

"Anyhow, there'll be no more bother about them pigeons," pursued Nelly. "I'll never forget the day I made a nice pie out o' a couple. Black and blue I was for weeks afterward."

"You ate Snooky's pigeons?" Oliver was incredulous.

"So did he," she chuckled balefully. "Was he sick when he found out? Now I'll eat the whole lot of them."

"Better not touch them until the police tell you to," Oliver warned her. "I'm sending a man up to count them right now."

"Don't bother," Nelly advised him. "There's all their names and all about every darn one o' them written down in that book on the table."

Sally picked up the worn blue notebook. It was the cheap, ruled type used in schools. "She's right, Buster. There's a page for each bird. Starts with his name. Gives the distance for various flights the bird made. Bird's age. Description of each."

"Let's run right up and check the loft," suggested Oliver. "Maybe we can get through in time to clear the pigeons for Nelly's supper."

"No rush," said Nelly blithely.

"Bein' with cops makes me lonesome; think I'll mosey on down to the tavern, soon's I finish this."

Outside on the landing, Sally paused and gave the ladder-like stairs to the roof a slow scrutiny. "What the heck," she said, "I might as well go first. Won't cost me anything, and it might brighten up the day for you."

This cryptic remark became amply clear when Sally started up the ladder ahead of him. Those long stretches of smoothly tapered nylons really did make the sun seem dull and overcast by comparison, he noted.

As Sally read off the descriptions, Oliver scrutinized each pigeon, checking it off against the list. A complete check necessitated getting into the cage and rousting out the pigeons nesting in the barrels.

"Rodney is missing," declared Sally, when the entire list had been double-checked. "He's brown; has the best record in the book, too."

"That must be the one he decided to take with him," agreed Oliver.

"That's not what you really think," scoffed Sally. "Why are you so shy about sticking your neck out for your brains? Give out."

"Since it's Sally that's asking," he said, "I'll admit that I don't take much stock in this business of suicide or accident."

"You don't have to tell me that," Sally disclaimed. "Just because I'm blonde, I don't have to be dumb. I can tell when you start baying on the track of a murderer; but what about some reasons?"

"Nelly gave me that," Oliver pointed out, "when she slipped up on that Carstairs thing. You can't make me believe that a smart operator like Snooky would tell an old boozier like Nelly anything."

"You mean unless he was getting loose-lipped in general for some other reason," Sally filled it in.

"Right," agreed the detective. "And that's motive enough. To a smart operator like the guy who planned that Carstairs caper and hired Snooky's technical talents, a loose lip would be fatal. These smart amateur crooks have a big advantage over the regular boys in some ways; but when it comes to the blowoff, they don't have the underworld connections to hide out, make a getaway, or buy out. They're strapped but good."

"How does Rodney figure in this?" she queried.

"I think he did it," answered Oliver succinctly.

"Now, Buster, be reasonable," she pleaded. "How could that poor little pigeon kill a great big man... or even a puny little wart like Snooky?"

"How did you know Snooky was a little guy?" snapped Sergeant Oliver suddenly.

"Why, of course, the last time I saw..." she began, and suddenly broke off. Flustered, she looked down bashfully and then astantly at Oliver.

"Don't pull the kitten act on me," he growled. "You were meeting him, weren't you?"

"Why, Buster, I do believe you're jealous of that poor little fellow," she cried.

"LET'S SEE now," he mused. "It must have been almost two weeks ago that he came to the precinct station with a complaint that somebody had swiped one of his pigeons. The boys out front around the desk got quite a laugh out of it. And Corcoran thought some of the fun would smear off on me if he assigned me to the case. That's when you must have met Snooky."

"Well, there was no harm in it," she pouted. "He came into the Police Matron's office by mistake when he was looking for you; I thought he was a funny little guy and we got to talking."

"Sure, and then you got some big

and noble ideas about reforming him and making him a useful member of society," the detective cut in.

"And I was really making some progress, Buster," she said defiantly. "We met for coffee and rolls and a talk two or three different times and he told me I had shown him the possibility of an entirely new way of life."

"He was falling for you, Baby," Oliver told her. "I guess if a louse like Corcoran can do it, Snooky had a right to do it too. But he made the mistake of getting drunk with this new feeling of the hot blood pounding through his veins, and started confessing his sins to old Nelly, of all people."

"You're talking like a book," she protested; "this is serious, Buster. Don't build it up too much. Do you really think that's what happened?"

"And naturally Nelly spouted off all over the bars she hangs out in," the detective concluded, "and Snooky's talented amateur partner in the Carstairs burglary got wind of it and started wheels grinding."

"Oh, Ralph!" she wailed. "It's terrible to think that I might have had something to do with what happened to Snooky. He'd decided to reform, and started talking about..."

"Hold it, Baby," he reminded her. "Don't forget that Snooky was a crook and that you're a cop. What happened to Snooky put him out of business; that's your job. And it's also going to put the mastermind out of things, too."

"You really have something, Buster?" she queried eagerly. She was, after all, the descendant of a long line of policemen.

"Take a look in this box Snooky used to carry his pigeons around in. He's had it for years. Used to take the birds out into the country and turn them loose for the flight back. Take a good look at it, Sally," he urged.

"I never did understand what these pigeon fanciers get out of watching a homing pigeon go home. Same old

trick all the time." She scrutinized the gleaming black enamel interior of the lunch box.

"But, Buster," she said, puzzled. "I don't see what you mean. The box is slick as could be; there's nothing in it."

"You mean to tell me you grew up in a city and don't know any more about pigeons than that?" he demanded. "That's just the point. The box is just as clean as it could be... inside!"

"I get it!" She giggled and took him by the arm. "What a dope I am! Come on, let's take it down to headquarters. I'll bet that when that wise guy got careless about the inside of the box he went whole-hog and left some fingerprints, too."

WITH AN Inspector from Homicide, they nervously sweated out the rundown of the fingerprint files in the Identification Bureau. The Inspector was sceptical but was willing, as a matter of courtesy to precinct officers, to expedite the search of his authority.

"What's the verdict, Nevins?" The Inspector smiled indulgently at the clerk who came back from the files, puzzling over a card.

"Took a little time, Sir," responded the clerk, tapping the card. "But there were prints; however, they weren't Sneed's as you suggested. What threw us off for a while is that the prints weren't in the criminal file. This man Howard C. Nutley is heavily bonded by an insurance company. That's how we happen to have a record at all."

"What's the address?" The Inspector was alert, impressed. "We'll have him picked up right away for questioning."

"Business address, Sir?" queried the clerk. "Charles J. Carstairs & Co., General Brokers, at..."

"That's it," cut in the Inspector. "I know where to find him." He picked up the phone attached to the side of his borrowed desk. The pick up order on Howard C. Nutley went out.

"He's the president of the brokerage house," explained the Inspector when he'd completed his call. "And I'll bet that none of that cash has shown up, simply because he was more interested in covering up the fact that there were shortages in his portfolio of the firm's security holdings. The money wouldn't matter to him; he could afford to let it cool off."

"Wonder how much it cost him to have that little bomb rigged up in an aluminum capsule?" mused Sergeant

Oliver. "He must have gone to a lot of bother to make that lunch box look just like the one Snooky carried around, just so he could pull a switch and get a bird to carry the bomb to Snooky."

"He knew enough about pigeons to know that they'd go home when they were released," he added. "But he sure didn't know enough about pigeons to go fooling around with them. Including stoolpigeons."



Special Feature

THE CIGARET CLUE

by HAROLD GLUCK

This murder scheme was sound enough, but there was a fundamental flaw in its execution. Can you find it?

THE PLEASANT, friendly smile that Jerry Harding wore at parties and other social affairs was no longer on his face. In its place was that hard look of determination that his sister knew so well. Now he faced her alone in the living-room of his uncle's private house.

"It's too late for any backing out, Eileen; Uncle John is taking too long a time to die. We have to help him out of this world. And just remember—his insurance policies have a double-indemnity clause, so it must look like an accident. And we can't wait any longer. He's bound to find out sooner or later that I forged his name to the deed of the house we sold in Florida."

Murder is a nasty word, no matter how you try to disguise it, and for the past two weeks Eileen Harding had

been battling with her conscience. Her better nature had lost the one sided fight, for her unpaid bills were piling up in her desk.

"I don't want to be here when it happens," she pleaded with her brother. "And be certain it looks like an accident; if anything goes wrong, we would be caught and punished."

Jerry Harding laughed. "The entire thing is foolproof," he insisted. "I have gone over every detail carefully. The people in the neighborhood all know, Uncle John is a heavy drinker. Last month, he dropped a cigaret on the floor, and it started to burn the blanket. Dr. Winslow smelled the smoke and put out the fire in time. That's how I got the idea. Uncle John has finished more than a quart and he's in

his bed. I'm going to set fire to his blanket in ten minutes. You go out for a walk; when you see smoke from the bedroom window, then run to the nearest fire alarm and send in the signal."

Quietly, Jerry Harding tiptoed into his uncle's bedroom. He took out his cigaret lighter and set fire to the highly-inflammable bed cover. Flames spread like lightning; soon the body was a human torch. The flames crept down to the floor. Quickly the killer lit a cigaret, took a few puffs, and then dropped it to the floor. It would show how the fire had started.

EILEEN and her brother Jerry had been in the kitchen for more than an hour when Detective William Pearson entered.

"The fire marshal has gone over every inch of the room. I notice how your hands were burned from the futile attempt to save your uncle. But tell me," and here the detective paused for a

psychological effect, "why did you make a farce of trying to save the man you had already killed?"

The attack had come so suddenly that Jerry Harding had to gasp for his breath before replying.

"You are kidding, aren't you?" he managed to get past his lips. "You found the half-burned cigaret on the floor which my uncle had smoked. It obviously set the bed cover afire."

"That's the story you want us to believe," answered the detective, "and you thought it was clever the way you smoked that cigaret and dropped it to the floor. In court we will show you planned to kill your uncle. Whether or not your sister was an accessory is something we will have to discover."

QUESTION: How did Detective Pearson know it had to be murder and couldn't have been an accident?

[*Answer On Page 98*]

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Cantella had a choice: he could pay one hundred thousand out of court for this accident case, or be sued for five hundred thousand. But it wasn't even as simple as that . . .

THE SQUEEZE

by MATT CHRISTOPHER



THE DOOR chimes rang, a spine-tingling death-knell that resounded eerily while they struck, then faded out into the gloomy early morning silence.

A large, mahogany door opened across the expansive living room and a short, smiling Chinese came gliding forward.

"I'll answer it, Mr. Cantella," he said. He stepped through the vestibule and opened the outer door.

Presently he returned, bowed to Dave. "It's a Mr. Morton Jerard to see you, Mr. Cantella."

Dave Cantella, relaxing in an easy chair after a bacon-and-egg breakfast—but still enduring a headache, after a too-eventful night—puckered his forehead in a frown. The name meant nothing. "Show him in, Charlie."

A man about six-foot-four stepped into the living room. He was wearing a dark business suit and black, narrow-brimmed hat. He swept off the hat with grace commensurate with dignity and smiled. "How do you do, Mr. Cantella?" A long, bony hand stretched out like an eel and Dave took it.

"Have we met somewhere before?" he asked.

"No. Sorry."

Dave offered Jerard a chair, then said, "What can I do for you?"

Jerard smiled. "My business concerns the girl you struck last night with your car. I'm her lawyer."

Dave said nothing. He began to regard Jerard with suspicion, and to form an unbiased opinion about that smile. "What's on your mind?"

"As you have probably heard, my client, Miss Nita Fairway, suffered broken bones in her legs and a fractured skull."

Dave nodded; he had gotten that information himself from the x-ray specialist, Dr. Philips. "What's on your mind?"

"A matter of a hundred thousand dollars, Mr. Cantella." Jerard's lips glistened.

Dave stared. "A hundred thousand dollars? What're you talking about?"

Jerard leaned forward. "I'm talking about a hundred thousand dollar settlement, Mr. Cantella. My client will be suing you for a lot more—five hundred thousand, to be exact—unless you propose to meet our terms."

"Five hundred thousand? Isn't that being rather mercenary, Jerard?"

Jerard grinned. "Nevertheless, that's it, Mr. Cantella. You see, we know you're well covered—"

Dave frowned. "We?"

Jerard shrugged. "A figure of speech, Mr. Cantella; don't be so technical. We'll sue for five hundred thousand, and probably the insurance company will pay half, or a third. We know you must have at least a million dollar policy."

"How are you sure about that?"

Jerard spread out his hands. "It's common sense; you're president of Cantella Industries, a rich man. A million is a drop in the bucket. But we'll settle for a measly hundred thousand."

DAVE ROSE to his feet, his eyes blazing. Anger roiled in the pit of his stomach. "Get out, Jerard; get out, and don't ever come back."

Jerard rose. He was still grinning. "We've wanted to make it easy for you, Cantella. If you want to be stubborn about it, all right."

Dave clenched his fists. He was boiling hot now. Jerard's smile was toying with his patience. He stepped up to him, drawing back his fist to banish that smile, when suddenly Jerard's hand went to his pocket and came out with a gun.

"I wouldn't if I were you, Cantella."

He backed up to the door. "Think it over, Cantella. And remember what I told you. And let me add that I've never failed to get what I want. No matter what the cost, or who gets hurt."

Dave didn't feel like doing much during the day. He called at the plant for a couple of hours after dinner, and presided over a meeting with Vice-president Samuels and the board members over a \$2,000,000 order which had just come in from the United States Air Force. Another discussion was a change requested on a drive chain by an automobile firm, which would mean thousands of dollars in expenditures, but which would start yielding profits once the cost was made up.

When he was alone in his office, he telephoned Flora and asked if she'd have dinner with him. She would; she'd been anxious to see him all day anyway, she said.

Flora Hayes, daughter of Bertrand Hayes, owner of Hayes Realty, was—Dave hoped—the future Mrs. Cantella. She had tawny red hair which seemed to vary slightly in shade, depending on the brightness of the light that hit it. Her eyes were green, brown-speckled, and for Dave they held a warmth that reflected a love true as gold.

They ate in a cozy though fashionable restaurant just off State, then went out for a drive. He was sure a black car was following them, but he said nothing about it. Before he got too far into the desolate reaches of the country he turned around and went back. The car following him turned off on a dirt road.

He saw it driving slowly as he went by. He thought about going after it, but decided that more than two men and a gun would put the percentages ahead of him. And then, too, he had Flora to think of.

HE DROVE through the city and after a turn here and there in the hope of losing his followers, he headed up State again and stopped at *Perry's Dine And Dance Club*. Somewhere in the traffic shuffle he had lost the black car.

A waiter got them a table behind a white pillar and Dave ordered dry gin.

"Heard how the Fairway girl was coming along?" Flora asked.

"Not yet."

She looked at him curiously. "Dave, are you hiding something from me? I've been sensing it all evening."

He shrugged noncommittally. "I guess I have, Flora."

"What is it? What's been troubling you?"

"A guy by the name of Jerard visit-

ed me early this morning. Claims to be her lawyer. He said they're going to sue me for five hundred thousand dollars damages, but is willing to settle for a thousand cash."

"Have you talked to the insurance company about it?"

"Not yet."

"Do you think they'd settle?"

"I'm sure they won't. A hundred thousand? Why, it's crazy; Jerard knows the company would never pay anywhere near that sum, so he's trying to scare me into settling for a hundred thousand. If I'd fall for that sort of thing, Dad would roll over in his grave."

The drinks came. They drank a little, then danced awhile. Flora's nearness stirred the fibres in Dave's body with the same effect a magnet had on a compass needle. At times he wondered which of the two had been the best thing that had ever happened to him—meeting Flora, or having inherited his father's factory.

Two hours slipped by unnoticed.

At eleven o'clock a waiter approached their table. "Mr. Cantella," he smiled, his teeth milkwhite against his dark, oily skin, "you are wanted on the telephone."

Dave frowned. Who could know he was here? "Thanks," he said. Then to Flora, "Excuse me, Flo. I'll be right back."

The waiter led him across the room to a booth. Dave stepped inside, saw the receiver lying freely on the shelf. He picked it up, said, "Hello?" when a man's broad shoulders covered the doorway and a deep, gravelly voice said,

"Hang up, Cantella, and no tricks; I've got a gun on you that knows this tricks-and-treat stuff much better than you do."

Dave looked around at the ruddy face with high-cheek bones and black, metallic eyes. The man's right hand was in his bulging, coat pocket. He hung up.

"Outside," the man ordered.

He stepped back to let Dave out. There was an archway at his left that led to a narrow, dimly-lit hallway. He walked past two doors, one marked *Boys*, the other *Girls*.

"Keep going," the man said.

Dave opened a door down the end of the hall and walked out. The moment he set his foot on a wooden porch a blurred movement in the darkness caught the corner of his eye. A fist belted him in the stomach and he doubled up, pain shooting against his face, and then a backhand slap struck him across the neck. The knee moved aside and he went down.

THET BLOW on his neck paralysed him, but only for a moment. Dave, a heavyweight boxer in his college days and a baseball player to keep himself from getting musclebound, was still in shape to withstand some of the rigors of torture. His vision, though hazy, was enough to present him a clear picture of where his assailant was.

He pushed with his legs and wrapped his arms around the man's knees. His head sank into the man's stomach like a pile driver. The man groaned, fell backward.

The second hood walloped him behind the ear with the butt of his gun, and his head rang.

"One tough monkey." The hood's voice sounded faint and jumbled in his scattered mind.

"The better to play with," said the other.

Dave lifted himself to his elbow, gasping for breath. A kick in the ribs sent him flat on his stomach. His arms doubled up at his sides. A constellation that wasn't so heavenly sparkled before his eyes.

"This is just the beginning, Cantella," the hood with the gun said thickly. "And it don't stop until you come across with the hundred grand."

"I think maybe this will loosen him up a bit, Truck. A cut. A nice cut a

half an inch deep between his ribs."

Dave moved his head. The other hood, a slender, blond youth with a pimply face, was holding a knife now, holding it with the blade up. He pulled air into his lungs, wondering if the kick had cracked any ribs, and turned on his side.

The knifer came toward him, his face twisted in a leer, his eyes dancing with satanic pleasure. "This will soften you, Cantella. A cut—a shallow cut between the ribs."

"Stick that back in your pocket, Rip," the other hood snapped.

"Who's gonna make me?"

"I am."

The knifer turned. He looked at the gun. A smile of displeasure warped his features. "Always you have to spoil my fun. What's the matter, Truck? Sight of a little blood make you sick?"

"The boss said no rough stuff unless we had to," Truck said. Then, "Listen!"

There was a sound of footsteps in the hall. "Come on! Somebody's coming!"

They ran off into the darkness, around the building. A moment later a car started up, raced away.

The door opened and Flora Hayes stood silhouetted in the opening. She saw Dave on the ground, and a scream pealed from her lips.

HE WASHED himself in the men's lavatory, got in the Cad with Flora, and drove downtown. He explained everything that had happened, blaming himself for not suspecting a ruse. Nobody knew they were here—nobody but the man in the car that had been following them.

"One thing for sure," he said. "They're not bothering at all with the insurance company. They want the money from me, and probably won't stop until they get it."

He drove to Connor Street. Dr. George Case, his family doctor for thirty years, bandaged the bruises and

said not to worry, there were no broken ribs. He wanted to know how Race got banged up. Dave said he had gotten into a fight.

"What army?" Dr. Case smiled.

Dave grinned. "Don't know; never saw them before in my life." He left the doctor a tenspot and walked out.

In the car Flora sat close to him and rested a hand on his knee. She looked straight out of the windshield with fear in her eyes, the same fear he felt in the cold, tense grip of her hand on him.

"They're monsters, Dave," she whispered as the car slithered through the streets; "they won't let you go till you pay. Just as you said."

"I know."

"Why don't you ask for police protection?"

"I doubt if it'll do much good."

"You could try."

She looked at him. Her eyes were moist. "If you don't value your life," she said, "I do."

"They wouldn't want to kill me; they want money, not my life."

Her right hand came up and she pressed his arm. "Dave, could you pay if you had to?"

"I'm not sure. I might have had the money last fall, when I invested fifty-thousand back into the company. Now—I don't know. We're a far cry from somebody like General Motors."

He took her home and kissed her at the door. She smiled up at him, but he couldn't mistake the fear in her eyes. "Darling, do we have to wait till October?"

He nodded. "I promised Mother we'd wait until she got back."

"But you could break it; I'm sure she understands how we feel about each other."

"She'd be hurt." He smiled. "Don't worry. As soon as she sets foot off the boat, we'll get married and take off for Europe ourselves."

Her eyes blinked. She lifted her mouth, kissed him. "I can't stand be-

ing away from you a minute while this is going on. I'm afraid, Dave. Awfully afraid."

"I'll watch myself a little better from now on," Dave promised. "Good night, Flora."

"Good night, Dave."

THREE WAS a note on the dining room table for him. *Please call Dr. Ralph Phillips the minute you get home.*

He frowned, went to the telephone. "This is Dave, Doctor," he said. "What's up?"

There was a note of caution, alarm in the doctor's voice. "Can you come right over, Dave?" he asked.

The voice seemed miles away, as if someone else's receiver was off the hook.

"Something wrong, Doctor?"

"Very wrong; it's eating me like an acid."

"Sit tight. I'll be there as soon as I can."

The Cad had a way of diminishing the size of street blocks. Dr. Phillips' office was downtown, but he lived on the hill beyond the city limits of Lydon, in a whitebrick home surrounded with shrubbery. Two Iroquois pines flanked the entrance of the driveway.

A young colored man admitted Dave. He led Dave through the richly decorated living room, a mauve-painted hallway, and then into a study. Standing with his back to a white marble mantle was a tall, grayhaired man with glasses, nervously dry-washing his hands.

"Hello, Dave?"

They shook hands.

The doctor looked like a sick man. "What's the trouble, Doctor?" said Dave.

Dr. Phillips shook his head. "I've got to get something off my chest, Dave. I can't stand it any longer. And if they kill me for it..." He shrugged helplessly. "I'm pretty old, anyway. Not many years to go."

Dave wet his lips. "What're you trying to say, Doctor?"

Dr. Phillips looked at him squarely. "That girl, that Nita Fairway—she's as well as you and I, Dave. She has no broken bones, no skull fracture, nothing but a few scratches on her legs. I was threatened to death if I didn't list those injuries on my report after I x-rayed her."

Dave stared.

"They had watched you several days before they pulled it, Dave," the doctor went on; "they knew exactly what time each evening you drove to pick up Flora Hayes. They knew the streets you took, the speed you drove."

"Professionals."

"Exactly. Picking on people who carry high policies."

"You haven't told the police yet?"

"No; I wanted to tell you first. I think I'd better call them now."

Just then the door opened. Morton Jerard, looking like an ambassador from the devil, himself, grinned fiendishly from the doorway. "Doctor, for a tired old man you stay up too late and talk too much."

THE KNIFER, Rip, followed Jerard into the room.

"You guys have an uncanny way of getting around, don't you?" said Dave.

Jerard smiled. "Our system works quite satisfactorily, Cantella." He looked at the doctor. "I was under the impression that I couldn't trust you too long, Doctor—even after bribing you and threatening your life. Rip, take him in the other room."

"With pleasure, Mort."

Rip pulled out his knife, thumbed a latch. The long, sharp blade snapped out like a snake's tongue. He gripped the knife with the blade pointed upward and marched up to Dr. Phillips. He pressed the tip of the blade against the doctor's chest, and grinned with sadistic pleasure.

"You heard the man, doc. Move."

The doctor's face turned paper-white.

Terror glazed his eyes. "You murderers!" he said; "you murderer!"

"Oh, shut it, before I slice you up right here! Come on, I said; get going!"

The doctor's hand fell on Rip's arm, tried to push the knife away. "Please! Please!" he cried. "I'm an old man! Have you no heart, no feelings?"

"Don't make me cry," Rip growled. "Tears make me very unbecoming. Come on. Move, I said!"

His knife-hand jerked, and the doctor let out a scream. Dave shot him a quick glance, saw the blood spurt from a three-inch gash, then drove his right hand lightning-fast down upon Jerard's gun hand to take advantage of that second when Jerard's attention was distracted. A shot blasted through the room, shattered a pane of glass.

Dave lunged against Jerard. Another shot practically pierced his eardrums. Glass tinkled, the lights went out. A foot came up, kicked Dave in the groin. He fell, rolled over as Jerard triggered two shots in succession in the exact spot he'd fallen. "Rip! Let's get out of here!"

The hall door opened. Lights splashed in. Jerard ran out, but Rip had stopped, was peering into the darkness, the knife dripping blood in his hand.

"Wait," he said; "I want to finish him myself. With this."

"Come on, you fool! Somebody will hear those shots and investigate!"

"Wait," Rip repeated. He started forward.

Dave moved his hand quickly behind him, before the knifer's eyes could get adjusted to the darkness, and wrapped his fingers around the legs of a chair. He yanked the chair up over his head, swung. The chair sailed through the air, crashed against Rip's arm and chest. He fell back, the knife clattering to the floor, vanishing under a day couch.

"Come on, Rip!"

Rip looked at Dave rising from the

floor. He was crouched, crouched in a pose he used when attacking a man with a knife. But he had no knife now; all he had was his hands, and he wasn't good with just his hands. His eyes dilated with frustration and fear.

His lips rolled back and he snarled. "Next time, Cantella. I'll get you—next time."

He bolted out of the door.

Dave picked himself off the floor, stumbled over and looked down at the body of Dr. Phillips. The sight sickened him. The man's stomach and chest were cut to ribbons. Dave looked around. There was a thin blanket on the day couch. He covered the dead body with it.

Then he called the police.

Chief of Detectives Lou Bonomo, a 200-lb. giant with black eyes, and a ruddy face, listened to his story. The colored man verified it. He'd been put temporarily out of commission himself by a blow on the head while the two had been in here with the doctor and Mr. Cantella, he said.

Bonomo went to the phone, ordered all cars leaving Lydon to be checked on all routes for a radius of 15 miles. He related the description of the criminals, then hung up.

"Okay," he said then in his gruff, authoritative voice. "Let's get the corpse out of here."

BONOMO RODE with Dave to the hospital. At the desk Dave told the middle-aged, blond-haired woman who they were and asked to see Nita Fairway.

The woman stared curiously. "At this hour of the night?"

"It's important," Dave said. "Tell us what room she's in so we can go right to her."

The woman looked in front of her on the panel which held the list of hospital patients. "She's in a private ward; room four," she said. "Go down the hall and turn left. It's the first room

to your right as you pass the archway."

"Thanks."

They found the room. Dave palmed the knob, turned it, walked in. The room was pitch-dark. He flicked on the light switch and stared. Somebody had been lying in the bed; the covers were rumpled. But it was empty now.

"She's gone!" Bonomo said.

"Yeah," said Dave. "And I'm not surprised. They must've sneaked her out of here just before they came up to Dr. Phillips' house."

"How did they know he was going to tell you the truth about the girl?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his hands over his eyes and felt like sitting down he was so tired; "I don't see how they could've known."

"They must've learned somehow," said Bonomo. "When did you get word from Phillips?"

"Tonight. As soon as I... Hey, wait a minute!" Dave looked up, snapped his fingers. "Now I know. While I was talking with Dr. Phillips, I thought there was something wrong with the line. There was; it was being tapped."

"Then that's the answer," Bonomo said.

They returned to the car. "Drop me off at Headquarters," said Bonomo.

Dave did, then went home.

Dead tired, he showered and went to bed. He'd hardly fallen asleep when the phone beside his bed rang and he picked it up. Damn! he thought. What now?

"Cantella?"

"Speaking." The sleep cobwebs vanished from his mind.

"This is absolutely my last call, Cantella. The police are hot after my tail, as you know. I'm an impatient man and like I told you before I always get what I want. I'm going to get it this time, too."

"The only thing you and your hoodlums are going to get, Jerard, is the electric chair."

"I've heard that before, Cantella, and

I'm still here. I'm serious about that one-hundred thousand. To prove it to you why don't you call up Flora Hayes?"

"Flora?" Dave's hand tightened on the receiver. "Keep her out of this, Jerard."

Jerard chuckled. "That's for you to do, Cantella. And it'll cost you a hundred-thousand dollars."

Dave began to sweat. "So help me, Jerard, if you do anything to Flora—"

"Yes, Cantella?" From the other end of the wire a soft laugh sounded.

Dave flung the covers back and swung his legs over the side of the bed. "Where are you, Jerard?"

"Bring the money in a small suitcase to the old covered bridge that crosses the river. Park your car on your side of the bridge, then get out and walk with the suitcase to the other side. I'll be there waiting for you. And, Cantella—don't bring any cops. The minute I spot one, I got Rip ready to take care of Miss Hayes."

"You—you've got her?" His breath caught.

"Sure, I got her, Cantella. A beautiful girl. You know what Rip says? He wishes you don't come. He says he's got ideas about Miss Hayes. Well, what do you say, Cantella? Shall I be expecting you, say, in an hour?"

"I can't get that money in an hour! It's in the bank and the banks don't open up till nine-thirty tomorrow morning! You're asking the impossible, Jerard."

A laugh bubbled over the wire. "I never ask the impossible, Cantella. You're also one of the bank directors; you can open the bank yourself."

"I can't."

"Okay, get somebody with the key, and get the money. You're stalling, Cantella, and I don't like it. Maybe you don't love this Hayes girl like I thought you did. In which case Rip might as well have his fun. Huh, Cantella?"

Dave mopped his brows and his lips.

"I'll get the money for you," he said exhaustedly.

HE DROVE to the Hayes house on Michael Street. He was afraid to think of the events that must have happened when Jerard took Flora. He couldn't go to the bank without going there first and finding out.

His knock wasn't answered. The door was unlocked and he walked in. He found Mr. Hayes tied and gagged on the dining room floor. Blood had dried on his brown hair and on his chin. Dave freed his bonds.

"Help Mary," Mr. Hayes said; "she's in the kitchen."

She was tied to a chair. A dish towel was wrapped around her mouth and knotted in back of her head. Dave freed her. He told them about the call from Jerard and that he was going to the bank now to get the money.

"I don't think I've got it all," he said. "If I haven't, can you spare the balance, Mr. Hayes?"

A raw, black-and-blue bruise was on his chin. "I can go to fifty-thousand if it's necessary, Dave. Wait." He padded upstairs and came back five minutes later with green money wrapped in fifty and one-hundred dollar packages. "Here's ten-thousand," he said. "If you need more, let me know."

"Thanks," Dave said.

He drove to Frank J. Rawley's residence. Rawley's place was a mile away from his own, a big, \$100,000 mansion bordered by hibiscus and lilac bushes. He got Rawley out of bed and explained why he had to have the money.

Rawley stared at him. "Did you go to the police?"

"They know all about it," said Dave. "But this part here I've got to do alone. The killers have my fiance, Flora Hayes; they'll kill her if they even see the sign of a cop."

"What a goddam world we're living in," Rawley cursed, shuffling back

across the thick-carpeted floor. "Mornin's order you around and take what they want as if they own it. Sit down a minute while I dress."

He had his chauffeur drive him down to the bank, while Dave followed him in his Cad.

"Watch that electric eye," the bank president warned as he unlocked the heavy door. They ducked under it and walked across the dimly-lit, silent building.

Dave keyed opened the vault that held all his savings, bonds, securities, insurance policies, and other valuables. He counted a \$122,000 plus a few hundred over. He put a \$100,000 into the suitcase, re-locked the vault and walked out with Rawley.

"Thanks, Frank," he said at the door. "And do me a favor. Please don't call the police; it'll probably ruin everything."

"Don't worry," Rawley said. "I won't put a finger into it. But the moment I know you and Flora are safe, I'm getting into it with both hands. Why, goddamn it, Dave, it could just as well have been me they picked on!"

Dave got into the Cad and drove to the bridge.

JUST BEFORE he reached the bridge, he turned off the dirt road onto a patch of knee-high weeds. He turned off the lights, the ignition, and sat there a minute to gather his wits together. Then he got out and lifted out the suitcase.

It was between two and three o'clock in the morning. He had forgotten about time. All evening, things had been happening rapidly and he hadn't had much concern about hours, minutes, and seconds. But now time was most essential. Time was measured in every little movement he made, each step he took, each breath of air that he breathed. At the end of that time was a life. Flora's.

He got in front of the bridge and paused. He heard the ripple of water

flowing fifty feet below. A half-moon painted the night a dark, vivid blue. A weatherbeaten, tarnished sign over his head read: *For Horse And Buggy And Walking Only.*

He started forward. The bridge was dark and he could see nothing on it. On the other side, the dirt road wound away through pine woods and into the hills.

His steps made an eerie clump-clump sound on the wooden planks. He got halfway across when he saw a flaring skirt and hair flowing in the wind.

"Flora!" he said.

"Dave!"

His heart pounded. He ran, reached her side, and then saw that she was handcuffed to a latch which must have been used at one time for a chain.

"The rats!" he said, gritting his teeth.

A figure stepped from behind a tree. It was the knifer, Rip. Dave looked at his hands; he didn't see any knife, but didn't deny the possibility that he must have one in his pocket.

Then three others stepped forward. Jerard, Truck, and the long-legged blonde, Nita Fairway. The men trained their guns on Dave.

"You were smart, Cantella," Jerard smiled. "Toss the bag over here."

"Not until you free Miss Hayes."

"Rip, frisk Mr. Cantella."

Rip stepped forward, ran his hands down along Dave's body. "He's empty, Mort."

"Okay. Toss the bag, Cantella; I want to make sure the full one hundred grand is in it."

"It's in it. But how am I going to make sure that you're going to let her go after I hand you the bag?"

"Don't be stupid, Cantella. I've got the upper hand; I can riddle you down now if I wanted to."

Dave glared at him and tossed the suitcase. It landed at Jerard's feet. Jerard pocketed the gun, stooped and unlatched the bag. Then he produced a flashlight and sprayed its beam in-

side it. He began to count the money, taking each bundle of currency out and piling it beside the bag.

"All right, Rip," he said as he finished; "he's all yours."

The knifer shot glazed eyes at Dave. His teeth bared in a grin. His hand went under his coat and came out with a knife. A long, straight, pointed knife. "My pleasure, Mort," he said. He stalked after Dave.

A gasp broke from Flora. "No! No!" she screamed. "You promised, Jerard! You promised!"

"Promises are like leaves in the wind, Miss Hayes. They're on the tree long enough to make you enjoy them, then are blown away."

He smiled dispassionately.

DAVE TENSED. The knifer took another step toward him, and another. He was crouched with his shoulders low, his knife hand held in front of him with the blade angling up, his left arm away from his body. "This is a promise I keep, Cantella," Rip said. "I'm going to enjoy this. Really enjoy it."

He feinted to the left. Dave jumped, his hands thrusting outward. Rip laughed.

Dave heard Flora crying, but he didn't take his eyes off Rip; he didn't dare.

Then Rip lunged, growling like a wild animal. He slashed with his knife. Dave brought up his foot with a vicious kick. Rip moved his knife hand aside and tried to catch the foot with his left. He missed, stepped back, and laughed again. "A kicker, huh? Try it again, Cantella."

His head went down, weaved, and he came in again. Dave leaped to the knifer's left with the agility of a panther. He caught the knife hand by the wide wrist and swung a hard right at Rip's head.

Rip's long, ape-like left arm circled around Dave and pulled him to the floor of the bridge. Dave went after

the knife hand with both hands now, twisted the arm as if he were wringing a mop rag. The fingers opened and the knife fell. Dave grabbed it, threw it into the tunnel of the bridge, heard it clattering.

"Now we're even, Rip."

Rip, with his arm around Dave's neck, tried to pull Dave's face down to his mouth. Dave laid the palm of his hand flat against the ugly face, pushed himself up, then belted the knifer on the jaw. He rose, straddling Rip's body, and picked him up with both hands by the scruff of his shirt-front.

A shot split the night apart, echoed and re-echoed through the tunnel of the bridge. Dave felt Rip's body jerk in his hands. "No, Mort! No!" Rip screamed.

Another shot roared. Rip moaned, fell slack in Dave's hands, and Dave stared. Jerard was turning the gun toward him.

Then more shots blasted, snapping like bolts of lightning inside the tunnel. Dave saw Jerard and Truck crumble to the ground, clutching themselves as they went down, their faces constricted in agonized pain. Dave let Rip's body sag to the floor.

Running feet thundered on the wood planking behind him. Dave turned, caught the gleam of brass buttons, of badges.

"How're you, Cantella?" Chief of Detectives Lou Bonomo yelled.

"Okay, Chief!"

A tired grin spread across Dave's face.

He hurried to the body of Mort Jerard, fished into his pockets, found a loose key. Then he returned to Flora, and unlocked the cuffs.

"Oh, Dave!" she sobbed. "I thought sure—"

"I did, too," he said, and took her in his arms.

Bonomo came toward them. Behind him four other policemen took custody of Nita Fairway and stood looking impartially at the fallen victims.

"Good thing I had you tailed, Cantella," Bonomo smiled.

Dave frowned. "Tailed?"

"Uh-huh. I had a man on you ever since you left me this morning. When you took a bank president with you to the bank, and took your money out, my man buzzed me; and I figured now was the time to detail some extra help." He looked aside at Flora and grinned. "Carry on, Cantella. I think you've got some unfinished business."

Dave grinned.

He took a deep breath and sighed. "I think you're right, honey," he said to Flora. "We won't wait for Mother; that boat's taking too long to get here."



2 Thrilling Novels

★ SATAN'S OWN

by T. R. Bray

★ BOOTHILL BOND

by Harlan Clay

Leading off the topnotch July issue of

ACTION-PACKED WESTERN

Why should a beautiful young girl masquerade as the grandmother of a well-known hood?

DOUBLECROSS TIME

Novelet

by SAUL ANTHONY

"I'M AFRAID to go to the police—"

The old lady looked timidly over her shoulder to make sure she and John Sale were alone in his office.

"—the police might be looking for my nephew, too. I wouldn't want to be the cause of getting him into trouble." Her eyes filmed with tears; she tucked a loose strand of silver hair under her grandmother's bonnet and forced a pitiful smile.

Sale thought her the queerest customer who'd ever walked into the Sphinx Agency; the shiny black dress she wore might have been made forty years ago; her black hand-mitts with the open fingers and old-fashioned high-button shoes looked like something right out of the gay nineties.

"If the law's after this nephew of yours, Mrs. Dore, he must be in trouble already."

"Perhaps so, Mister Sale. It wouldn't be the first time. The way of the transgressor has been very hard for Davie. He's not been what you might call a good boy." The old lady produced a tiny square of white cambric and dabbed at her eyes. "But my time is drawing near. Blood ties



are strong in our family. I want my nephew near, the rest of my days."

"Suppose he's in prison, Mrs. Dore? Or dead?"

"Then I must know," she quavered. "I... I will pay your fee, if only you can locate him for me."

She opened a musty black handbag and extracted a leather clasp-purse of vintage of 1890. From it she took a crumpled bill; laid it hesitantly on Sale's desk. "Will that be enough? To start with?"

The crack operative of the Sphinx swallowed hard. "A thousand bucks? Why—uh, yes, ma'am. That's plenty. Now, about a description of your nephew..."

SHE OPENED the handbag again; produced a faded photograph of an angel-faced little boy, dressed in plush pants, a ruffled collar and Fauntleroy jacket; he had been posed with one hand on an elaborately carved chair-back; his expression said butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, his eyes gazed out of the picture with disengaging frankness.

"This is the only photograph I have. This was Davie at six. I'm afraid he's changed a good deal."

Brad noticed the photographer's imprint on the back of the picture: Simmonds, San Francisco, 1922.

"Yeah," he agreed. "Wouldn't be surprised if he'd altered a little." He took out a pad; questioned her methodically. Little Davie, it turned out, was Dave Berry, graduate of at least three state institutions in which the students were never allowed off the campus. He had written his aunt occasionally, from these institutions—always for money. When she had last heard from him, however, he was enjoying a brief vacation from official supervision and was residing under the alias of Dave Crandall at 74 Clement Place.

"Have you tried to get in touch with him at that address?"

"I wrote to him two weeks ago; my letter was returned. There was a note on the envelope, saying he hadn't left any forwarding address."

"Suppose he's gone out of town. You want me to bring him back?"

"Oh, no. No, indeed. Just you tell me where he is, Mister Sale. I'll go to Davie. I'd like for him to be surprised when he sees his auntie..."

"Yeah. He probly will be. Where'll I report to you, Mrs. Dore? Are you staying at a hotel?"

"I've always stopped at the Metropole; I shall be there until I hear from you." Her leave-taking bow was prim and dignified; the detective almost expected her to curtsey...

After she'd gone—he pulled out the thousand-dollar note and scowled at it. When his red-headed secretary came, in answer to his buzz, he tossed the bill across the desk.

"Take this around to the bank and see what they say to you when you ask them to break it into small bills."

The secretary made an "o" with her lips. "A phony?"

"Not this. It's the McCoy, all right. But I'd be interested to know if the

bank has a record of that serial number."

"Did that nice old lady give you this Mister Sale?"

"She did and she isn't."

"Huh?"

"She's not old. I doubt if she's a lady."

"Why, she must have been at least seventy—"

"Makeup, honeychile. Trick wig, wrinkle pencil and careful scenery. That black saddle bag was a stroke of genius, but those fingerless mitts gave her away."

"I thought they were just too sweet for—"

"—Yeah. They were. But sweet little seventy-year old mothers don't manicure their nails that way. She'd pared 'em down so they weren't needle-pointed and she'd tried to get the enamel off—but there was still enough left to label her an act."

The secretary shook her head in amazement. "You're not going to take her case, then?"

"I'm taking her thousand. And don't ask so many questions. I'm supposed to do that, around here."

- 2 -



E ASKED them in the fingerprint room at the Bureau of Identification, first.

"Powder this photograph, and see if anybody's been handling it who ought to be in the clink, will you?"

After the loop-and-whorl boys got their negative of Mrs. Dore's fingertip impression, Sale wandered into the record section.

"Hi, sarge. Got anything on a lug name of Berry?"

Sergeant Cullinan, in charge of the Gallery, looked up, curiously. "Twouldn't be Dave Berry now?"

"Twould be, no less. What do you have on him?"

"Everything but the cuffs, John." The sergeant dug profile and front-view photographs out of the file, added the official list of previous convictions. "Give a gander."

Sale compared the police-portraits with the San Francisco picture.

"Now, would you figure this Rollo boy," he handed Cullinan the photograph of the angel-child, "could ever grow up to look like Dave, here?" The face on the Bureau of Identification prints was large and heavy-featured with thick round lips and a pugnacious chin. Berry of the police records was bull-necked and scowling—but necks can grow up that way and expressions do change. Nevertheless: "Somebody's been ribbing me," Sale growled. "Look at his ears."

"What's the matter with 'em?"

The detective pointed to the pendulous lobe of the ears on the boy in the 1922 mounting. "You know ears don't change. Only thing in the human body that doesn't change, from diapers to shroud."

"True for you, John. They grow a little, but they don't alter, at all, at all."

"Then how about these batwings?" The official likeness of Dave showed large, fan-like ears, with no lobe at all.

"Maybe you got something there, John."

"It's an idea. But I don't like to have clients think they can play me for a sucker. What is this Berry's line?"

"Used to be a lush-worker. Half a dozen arrests in subways, rolling drunks for a few dollars. But lately he's been doing stickups and working the night-club angle. You know, tipped off by someone on the inside, follows a couple home—or wherever

they go—and hijacks the jewelry. Supposed to work with a Cuban girl—Carlotta Monchez. She was supposed to have given him the switch-over and turned him in to one of the insurance outfits, but there wasn't any conviction."

"There's no warrant out for him, now, according to this sheet."

"No, but he's on the 'wanted-for-questioning' list."

"Something special?"

"That *Cork Club* job, last week. Nobody saw him, or anything. Just that it's his line of work. Lemme know the second you put the finger on him, will you?"

Sale said "Sure" absent-mindedly. He was recalling the tabloid sensation of the previous week: Francisco Fuerga, a visiting South American diplomat, and Clara Lynn, a popular torch-singer and favorite in cafe society, had been held up in the lobby of her apartment house ten minutes after they'd left the *Cork Club*. A hundred thousand dollar cabochon-emerald necklace had been ripped from the throat of the singer, she had been severely beaten, and the diplomat received a fatal knife-thrust under the heart as his reward for attempting to defend his companion....

The Sphinx man grabbed a cab and gave the Clement Place address to the driver. All the way uptown the clicking of the meter formed an accompaniment to the refrain running through his brain—"A hundred thousand necklace, and a thousand-dollar bill...."

THE WOMAN who answered the door at Number Seventy-four was short, fat, and had thick, greasy black hair and a well-developed moustache.

"Mister Crandall ain't here no more," she replied to Sale's query.

"When'd he give up his room?" The detective got one foot inside the door.

"Who wants to know?"

Sale showed his license badge;

didn't bother to explain that he was a private operative.

"He ain't been here no more for a week, already," she protested. "Besides, he never done nothing to get in no cop-trouble. A fine man, sure."

"Anybody got his room?"

She shook her head. "Meester Crandall, he's owe me for two weeks he ain't paid, already. I keep the room yet, but now I got to rent it, he don't come back."

Sale started up the stairs. "I'll make you a little bet he don't come back. Anyway, I'll take a peek at his parlor, if you don't mind."

The landlady unlocked the door grudgingly; stood staring sullenly while John opened bureau drawers, peered into closets, rummaged through newspapers, time-tables and playing cards strewn on the center table.

In the bureau he found some cards, which he palmed and slid unnoticed into his pocket. On the window sill he picked up a couple of paper match packs. In the closet he found a discarded pair of socks, a lot of gossip columns cut out of newspapers, some crumpled-up time-tables, and some racing papers.

It was too much of a coincidence, he decided. Cards from a couple of Boston importers, match packs from a quick-lunch chain in the Hub and time-tables for through trains to the Bay State capital.

"You know what sort of a job this roomer of yours had?" Sale was casual.

"I should ask questions from every Tom, Nick and Harry, what work they do?" She glowered at him. "No. I don't know. Always he's good pay and swell dresser. I should worry what kind job he has. Maybe it's on the races, he's gambling. Always he's got plenty money."

Sale thanked her sarcastically, got into the cab and punished his gray matter on the way downtown. There was nothing in the room he had just

visited to connect Berry with the *Cork Club* killing. Yet the fact that Dave had cleared out about the time of the crime was worth a further checkup. And Auntie Dore had certainly lied to him, because the landlady at Clement Place would have had a letter, if she expected Dave to return.

A call to the Bureau of Identification drew blank —there had been plenty of prints on the photograph of "Davie at six," but none to which the police had attached a classification number. Then he spent an hour in the morgue. The *Daily Herald* had a lot of interesting material, on Senor Fuerga in its files.

- 3 -



E TOOK the night plane to Boston.

When he got on, he was wearing a light gray pin-check suit, tan shoes, dark blue shirt and coffee-colored tie. His snap-brim felt was just the right shade to match his suit.

The porter who had taken his two suitcases looked curiously at the big, new English saddle-leather kit bag and then at the cheap black-enamored fiberboard suitcase that was the other half of Sale's luggage.

When John got off the plane, he needed a shave and he looked as if he needed a bath. He wore a soiled white shirt and his double-breasted serge suit needed pressing. His shoes were scuffed-out cloth tops with patent leather lowers; they made him look as if he was wearing spats out of season. His necktie was wine-colored satin and the silk handkerchief dangling from his breast pocket must have been purchased at the same time and shop. The black velour hat on his head was badly in need of blocking.

Instead of his customary briar pipe, he was smoking a cigaret in a yellow holder; there was a distinct fragrance of alcohol about his clothing.

John checked the kit-bag at the South Station, carried the cheap suitcase with him down Essex Street.

There was a sign over a dingy doorway that read: RUDY'S ROOST.

He climbed the long flight of wooden stairs and pushed into a small room with a counter running along one side.

Behind the counter was a dilapidated rack with a dozen or so brass keys hanging on numbered hooks; tilted back in a chair, sleeping with his mouth open, was a pimply-faced youth of twenty or so. He came to life as Sale banged the ball on the counter. He scratched his head, rubbed his nose and avoided John's eyes as he passed over a pen and pointed a dirty finger at the register.

The investigator scrawled, "M. Kessler, Baltimore, Md." in the book. The clerk looked at the signature without interest: "Pay in advance," he said sleepily.

Sale got a brand-new alligator-skin wallet out of his hip pocket, produced a fiver. The youth had plenty of chance to see the initials "M.K." lettered in gold on the inside of the wallet, if he had wanted to....

The advance was rung up in a battered cash register; Sale got a key numbered 21. The clerk sat down and went to sleep; Sale went hunting for his room.

It was a foul-smelling cubby-hole about ten by twelve; there was an iron cot with sagging springs, a rickety dresser and a green-enameled kitchen chair. The mirror over the dresser was cracked and someone had carved his initials on the inside of the door panel....

He opened the flimsy suitcase; took out a bunch of gaudy neckties, a couple of silk shirts and a pair of candy-

striped pajamas. These he tossed in the bureau drawers. On top of the dresser he put a round metal tin of cigarettes that had no brand name on the paper, some magazines with covers showing seductive girls taking off stockings or putting on stepins, and the cards he had found in Dave Berry's room. The cards were expensively engraved and read, "David Berry, Esq."

The suitcase he carefully locked with a key that was tied to a string inside the lid; he knew that an ordinary pin would pick the lock in two minutes...and he knew that he wouldn't be out of Rudy's Roost much longer than that before the clerk would have it open and discover the letters addressed to "Darling Dave," the box of reefer and the Colt automatic with the extra clip of cartridges.

He scowled at the reflection in the cracked mirror, adjusted the velour at a sporty angle and went out to find a telephone.

- 4 -



E USED up a lot of change in a phone booth, took in a morning movie, and had lunch in a restaurant favored by racing men. When he had finished with the chops and French-fries, he started on a round

of the beer joints in the South End.

Late afternoon found him sitting at a round oak table in the *Puritan Grill and Cabaret*. There was a backroom with a loud-speaker giving reports of the races at the Readville track; John got a glimpse of a blackboard with post-time odds. A jukebox was whanging away, and three or four couples were rug-cutting on a diminutive dance floor. Sale was working on his

eleventh beer, and seemed to be well on the way to getting plastered.

The waiter who had been serving him for an hour or so watched the velour hat tip lower and lower over the beer glass, observed the effort made to stay awake. On the next trip to the bar, he tried short-changing his customer. John let him get away with it.

Five minutes later a sharp-eyed blonde slid into an empty chair beside the detective. She was wearing a cherry-colored dress that had no back at all and very little front.

"Wanna buy Suzie a drink, honey?"

Sale looked up, bleary-eyed. "Who's Shusie? Mean, Whoosh, Suz?"

"I am, big fella."

"Shure. Buy li'l drink for li'l ol' Suzie-Q...."

He paid for whiskey while she drank straight gingerale. She got an arm around his shoulders and put a cheek close to his; there was a strong odor of musky perfume. John let her do the talking; he seemed to drowse off every few minutes. By closing time he had fallen forward on the table with his head pillow'd on his arms and was oblivious to her suggestions.

He made no objection when the bartender helped Suzie drag him out of the barroom and into a cab....

"Going to take you home, honey. Tell Suzie your name and where to take you...."

John protested groggily but finally admitted his name was Dave, and that he was bunking at Rudy's Roost. Then he relapsed into a coma.

The girl went through his pockets with the dexterity of long experience; took out his wallet, emptied it and put it back where she found it. She got out of the taxi, handed the driver some silver, gave him the name of John's hotel.

By the time the cab pulled up at the Roost, the investigator had sobered amazingly.

The night-clerk on duty paid no attention to him. Sale got to Twenty-one, laid down on the creaking cot without removing his clothes, put up the single window that opened on a fire escape; snapped out the light.

He laughed, lying there in the darkness, at the contents of that alligator-skin wallet that he had purchased for the occasion. There was little money, but a lot of dynamite in that leather that Suzie-Q had "skinned." Plenty of evidence that the owner was one Dave Berry, and enough more to indicate that he was badly wanted for a crime unspecified....

IT WAS two hours later, and—what with all the beer he had consumed and the stuffy bedroom—John was nearly asleep when he heard a faint scraping sound that might have been shoe leather on rusty metal. He began to breathe noisily.

Presently a vague shadow flowed noiselessly into the faintly luminous square of the window. There was no clearly outlined silhouette; Sale merely saw a bulk of shapeless darkness, where before there had been something less than pitch blackness.

The space before the window lightened again. John knew the intruder was inside the room.

He felt something move, close to the bed; clubbed his gun, lashed out savagely.

A grunt of surprise was followed instantly by a glancing blow that nearly broke John's collar-bone; he was half-way off the bed by that time—reaching in the gloom to get at his assailant. Something smashed the detective heavily on the side of his face; he got a grip on a thick wrist, wrenched it with every ounce he could put into it. The wrist went limp in his grasp; a body thudded to the floor.

Sale reached up to the string that switched on the single naked bulb in the middle of the ceiling; got a look at the man on the floor. He was a

stocky, barrel-bodied, bull-necked individual with the face that Sale had seen on Sergeant Cullinan's identification card.

He was heavily tanned, as if he had spent several weeks sunning himself on a beach, somewhere. He wore an expensive suit, a silk shirt, and a two-buck necktie. Also, he wore a diamond stickpin, a platinum watch chain across his vest front, and a small ruby set in a white gold ring.

- 5 -



THE MAN opened his eyes, blinked at the light, stared at John Sale in bewilderment. The investigator sat on the edge of the bed and swung a gun around his index finger by the trigger-guard.

The stocky man made a convulsive grab toward his left armpit.

"It done went and gone, stranger." Sale sympathized with him. "You ain't going to have any use for your pretty little plaything, anyhow." He spun the thirty-two hammerless to a shining blur of silver. "Besides, you might hurt someone with it, walking in your sleep and all."

The stranger spat out an obscene guttural...

"Hush, hush, you'll wake the neighbors." John poked him with the toe of his cloth-top. "And I want to hear that dead-time story you're planning to tell me."

"Guess what you can do," the other got up on his elbows, gauged his chances to rush Sale.

"I'll kick your teeth in, if you try it," John said pleasantly. "I might do it, anyway, but for nothing, if you don't start to sing."

The chunky man flopped back flat

on the floor, closed his puffy lips significantly.

"Or maybe I'll let the Little Boy Blues horse you around some." Sale suddenly scowled and the gun came to rest with the muzzle pointing at the short man's belt buckle. "What did you think you'd find in this room, to make you risk a hole in your guts?"

"You ain't going to call copper on me. You're afraid to. The cops are looking for Dave Berry..." The thick lips sneered.

"They are," John agreed. "And if you're not Dave in person, somebody has been libelled by the Bureau of Identification in little old New York." He sighted along the barrel absent-mindedly. "Maybe I won't turn you over to the brass-buttons, after all. It depends."

Berry sat up jerkily, his hands flat on the floor beside him. "What's the racket? fink? Why was you using my name in the joints around here?"

"I had to locate you, Davie ol' kid. And nobody would admit knowing anything except that you liked to lose money on the gee-gees. But I heard you were in town and one of the bookies told me he sent around some payoff money to the *Puritan*. Then I figured you might get curious if there was another Dave Berry playing in your backyard."

Berry told him to go to hell, then: "So you locate me, all right. So what's next?" His beady eyes squinted at Sale, trying to understand.

"So your Aunt Annie comes next." "Who?"

"Your Aunt Annie. Aunty Dore, don't you remember?"

"In a pig's eye. I ain't got no aunt nobody."

Sale chuckled. "I see what you mean. But just the same, your dear old Aunty will pay plenty potatoes to hold you in her arms, once more." Dave's face was puckered in perplex-

ity. "—Or maybe to scratch your eyes out. I wouldn't know why anybody would give a grand to look at you," the detective added.

At the mention of the thousand dollars, Berry's eyes showed white all around the pupils; his mouth gaped. "Did you say this dame was old?"

"Maybe sixty, sixty-five."

Dave shook his head, but the fear stayed in his eyes. "There is something screwy, somewhere."

"That's one for the book, Dave. You know what it is."

"No." Berry was hoarse. "Honest to God, I don't know no old lady—" he stopped short, swore at the investigator. "You ain't givin' me the business?" He started to get his legs under him.

"Strictly on the up and up." Sale put a shoe in the short man's midriff, pushed gently. "You'll get a belly-ache, Dave, you try to stand up." He considered Dave for a minute. "Supposing this Aunt Annie wasn't more than—maybe twenty-five or thirty. Would you know who I mean?"

Dave's face went ashen with sweat; he licked his lips. "There is a canary who has been chasing after me for a couple years. She is sore I won't give her a tumble."

John laughed outright; he kept on showing his teeth but he stopped laughing. "Why, you punk, do you think you can kid me with that gigolo stuff? A thousand bucks to fondle a puss like yours!" He stood up. "I gave you a chance and all you do is hand me that mahuska. So I'm going to wrap you up and deliver you to Aunt Dore, as ordered. What she'll do with you after she gets you will be her business. But it must be something pretty special if it's worth a thousand. It might even have something to do with those Fuerga emeralds. I wouldn't know about that, but I'll gamble Aunty does..."

He told Dave to roll over, face

down, and was at the bureau getting some neckties to use in tying him up, when the light went out!

He whirled to face the window, heard Dave scrambling to his feet; snapped: "No dice, Dave. I'll drill you. Stand still or—"

He heard the click as the door opened, fired a snap-shot at the place where anyone would be, coming in.

Then the ceiling fell in on him.

- 6 -



HEN HE came out of it, a few minutes later, the room was still dark—and empty. John Sale had a lump the size of an egg on top of his skull. He stepped out into the hall. The light that was supposed to illuminate the staircase was out, too.

"That damn clerk," John said to himself. "Listened at the door and blew the fuse to help Dave make a getaway." He lit some matches; picked up the thirty-two Berry had left behind, and put the shabby velour on his head, grimacing at the lump. "Must have had a sapper on him somewhere to raise a bump like that; I ought to have frisked him."

He went out and downstairs, gun in hand. There was light in the first floor; enough light to show a pair of legs sticking out from behind the office counter. Sale leaned over the partition; the pimply-faced youth lay on his back, eyes wide open, a look of horror on his pudgy features and an ugly hole in his throat. It was the right sized hole to have been caused by a thirty-two, and Sale never used anything but a forty-five. The detective didn't bother to feel the pulse; the clerk had been dead several minutes, anyway...

A siren screamed on the street; cars braked to a fast stop and a door slammed. John sprinted for the stairs, went up three at a time, into his darkened room and out the fire escape. If Dave could exit that way, so could he—and there were too many things to be done in a hurry to waste time explaining that it hadn't been his shot in the dark that had killed the night-clerk.

He dropped six feet from the lowest rung of the fire escape to a cement pavement; walked casually down a rubbish-cluttered alley and around the corner in the opposite direction to that of the patrol car.

A prowling taxi heard his hail, rolled him over to the South Station. He got his kit-bag out of the check-room, went to the men's lavatory and made a quick change. The man who walked out of the station ten minutes later was dressed in the gray pin-check and the new snap brim. The cloth tops had been replaced by tan oxfords and the gaudy tie and the handkerchief were no longer in evidence.

By the time he had taken a cab to one of the large hotels and secured a room, it was broad daylight. He got outside a healthy breakfast and considered the situation.

He had tricked Dave into taking his bait out of curiosity as to who was using his name. Dave was scared stiff, at the mention of the girl who was posing as his aunt. Also, he must have been plenty worried about what that night-clerk might have heard, or the night-clerk would be alive now. And the only name John had mentioned was that of the murdered diplomat, Fuerga.

Berry might be miles away from Boston at this very minute—but on the other hand, he might have a hide-out that was too good to leave. Then, too, Dave probably figured that John Sale would be getting a workout at

the hands of the police about now. For it certainly must have been Berry who had notified the police of the clerk's killing.

He went to his room, left a call for two o'clock, climbed into bed. It was almost three when he emerged from the hotel; four by the time he had rented a drive-yourself sedan and worked his way through heavy traffic to the corner below the *Puritan Grill and Cabaret*. The night-shift of taxi drivers had just come on; John hailed a jockey from the last cab in the rank on the corner.

"Look," he said, shamed-faced. "I'm in one hell of a jam, friend. Last night I picked up a wren from the beer-joint there and went home with her. I had a skinful all right—I'd ought to have known better."

"Those things will happen, buddy." The taximan was interested but non-committal.

"Yeah. They sure will." Sale scratched his head ruefully. "But here's the tough part. I'd bought a present for my wife, see. Away from home couple weeks, you know how it is."

"I'm a married man myself, mister."

"Well, it wouldn't be so bad except I phoned her I was bringing the stuff home. It was...uh...some underwear, see."

The cabby said he would like to have seen.

"And I must have given the stuff to this blonde while I had that snootful. I've got to get it back—because I ain't got enough dough to buy any more."

"What did the skirt look like?"

Sale tried to recall. "I know she was blonde and a snappy dresser. Looked like a showgirl. She said her name was...oh yeah...Suzie...."

The driver leered. "I'll say she's a snappy dresser; and vice versa. Tell

you, mister, I don't usually do this, but you look like a leveller and I been in dutch with the little woman myself, now and then. You might be able to get that landgerie back if you was to run around to Number Ninety-four Doeberry Street." He waved away John's proffered quarter. "Only don't say I told you, pal."

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UMBER Ninety-four Doeberry Street was a three-story rooming house that wore an air of dispirited gentility; it had once been a respectable locality. John Sale found the name '*Susan Toller*' on an aluminum plate over a letter-box; went upstairs and through a carpeted hallway until he found a similar plate tacked on the door of 3A.

When he knocked, a voice called "Jussaminit." It was less than that when she opened the door. She had on a rose-pink dressing-gown over a pair of nile-green pajamas and she recognized Sale instantly.

He had his foot against the open door, though; so her attempt to slam it in his face didn't go. "Don't throw a fit, sister," he said, shouldering his way in and making a quick inspection to see that she was alone. "Strictly a business call."

Suzie-Q was sullen. "I don't receive no gentleman callers in my room," she said, sharply. "So you better shove off right now, before—"

Sale held out his right fist, opened it slowly. Her eyes bugged out in fright as she saw the gold badge with the words '*Licensed Detective*'.

"I ain't done nothing," she wailed.

"You ain't got one single thing on me."

John leaned back against the door. "I'm in a hurry, sister. I've got a date with a killer and I don't want to be late. Now, I can tie you into a murder case as easy as that," he snapped his fingers, "but I don't believe you meant any harm. So if you'll smarten up and tell me what I need to know, maybe I'll forget about last night."

"I don't know anything about any murder."

"Read the papers, tonight, and you will. Your chum, Dave Berry, pointed a heater at a clerk in my hotel; and the clerk is sleeping on a slab at the morgue right now."

"It don't interest me, dick." She lit a cigaret, but her hand was shaky.

"Would it interest you to know that Dave is wanted for at least one more first-degree job? And that anyone who has had anything to do with hiding him out is liable to indictment as an accessory? Or don't you know what they do to blondes who pal around with murderers?"

He walked toward her, hammering the words at her; she retreated to the farthest corner of her room.

"I don't even know this guy, Dave, you're talking about. I never saw him."

"All right, play it the hard way, if you want to. Get some clothes on; we'll run down town to the homicide squad boys."

"No." Her face was gray with fear. "You can't frame me like this."

He grabbed her by the arm. "I'll take you in the way you are, if you're going to act up."

"What you wanna know?"

"Where Dave is."

"Honest to God, I don't know."

"Then get going!"

"Sometimes he hangs out at Billiard Joe's." She scarcely moved her lips.

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TEN MINUTES later, Sale's sedan was parked across the street from the neon sign which proclaimed that the basement pool parlor was Billiard Joe's. The investigator smoked half a deck of cigarettes before he saw a short, stocky figure emerge from the areaway across the street, recognized Berry in the lurid glare of the flashing sign.

John waited until Dave had a half-block lead on him, idled along behind in the car. Berry only went another block. He turned in, unexpectedly, at a loft-building entrance.

After a couple of minutes, John crossed the street, got into the hallway of the loft building.

Beside the staircase were the painted listings of half a dozen companies; none of them meant anything to the investigator—except the one that read:

Intercontinent Importers, Ltd.
Novelty and Costume Jewelry

The others were stocking manufacturers, enameling contractors, pillow-makers. But jewelry—that might interest Dave.

The Intercontinent Importers had the third floor of the building; John went out and crossed the street to a spot where he could see the third-floor windows.

There was a light in the end window; John guessed it was the office. After a little while, it went out.

John waited more than half an hour for Dave to emerge; then he decided that the jewelry importers were taking in at least one overnight guest. Well, Dave wouldn't be the first crook who had thought of eluding the police by sleeping in a business office instead of a rooming house or hotel.

But if Berry had those cabochon emeralds of Clara Lynn's, what good would they be to a company whose business was the importing of cheap five-and-dime store costume jewelry.



E SENT a wire to Mrs. Dore in care of the Hotel Metropole, New York City. The wire read:
N E P H E W
W O R K I N G
N I G H T S I N T E R-
C O N T I N E N T I M-
P O R T I N G
T H R E E - S I X-
E I G H T D E V O N S H I R E S T R E E T .
M A Y H A V E T O S T O P O N A C-
C O U N T O F H E A L T H , I F H E A T
C O N T I N U E S .

SALE

Then he read the evening papers. There was plenty about the murder at Rudy's Roost, including a fair description of himself as the suspected killer. But nowhere was there any mention of the name Berry. Yet from the cards he'd left in the room, the letters in the suitcase, the fingerprints on windowsill and doorknob, the police must have believed Berry was the occupant of Room Twenty-one. The description of "M. Kessler of Baltimore" was given in some detail. John hoped the checkman at the South Station hadn't remembered him—he still wanted a little time to straighten out this business of Davie and his aunt....

The phony Mrs. Dore couldn't get to Boston for five hours at least, if she depended on the railroad. But there were always planes, and a dame who would plank down a one-grand retainer wouldn't think twice about chartering a special plane. So he got back to the loft building and camped in a hallway opposite where he had a good view of the third floor.

It was an hour after dawn when Sale saw her walking briskly down the street.

"Must have been drinking Ponce de Leon water or something," he muttered to himself. She was wearing a snappy white linen suit, white sport shoes, a broad-brimmed hat straight off the Rue de la Paix and a pair of white-rimmed sun-glasses. She carried a huge red leather handbag and whistled nonchalantly as she looked for the street numbers.

The detective retreated into the darkest corner of his hallway; she didn't see him, although she scanned the street up and down before strolling into the loft building.

Sale gave her a two-minute lead. Then he lounged across the street; went up the first two flights like a cat. Which was appropriate, because he heard a noise like a rat gnawing at a wall—he crouched behind the bannisters on the second floor and watched her work.

SHE KNELT in front of the door, using the red leather bag as a cushion. From the bag she'd taken a toy size bit and brace; she was boring a ring of holes about three inches from the door lock. She kept oiling the bit with a tin can of sewing-machine oil....

It only took her a few minutes; when she had the circle of holes completed, she put her hand through the hole to turn the key. The door opened, all right, but Aunt Annie couldn't withdraw her hand. Dave was gripping it, on the inside. And he had a very business-like automatic in his free hand!

"Oh, it's you," he said. "I thought it was that nosey shamus you sicked on me."

"You're hurting my arm, Dave."

"No kidding? What you think I'm gonna do when I get you inside—buy you a drink?" He caught her other wrist, let go of the captured hand and yanked her viciously into the office.

Dave slammed the door, but didn't bother to lock it....

Sale got his ear to the door; heard the girl say: "You doublecrossed me. You never meant to give me my share of those emeralds. And I haven't been able to collect the insurance, either."

"You ain't got no share coming, frill. Except maybe a share of what's in this heater of mine."

"I won't stand for it, Dave! I'll go to the cops!"

"Then you'll go on a stretcher, babe. I ain't gonna take no more chances with you!"

"No!" The girl was shrill. "You wouldn't dare kill me!"

"You thought I wasn't gonna bump that high-hat, didn't you? This'll make twice you guessed wrong."

There was a scream, a muffled curse and John got the door open, quietly: "Hold everything, boys and girls," he said, grimly.

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BERRY STARTED to raise his hands over his head—when his gun was at shoulder height, out by his side, he twisted suddenly—fired at the detective.

John Sale felt the blast of the flame on his face as he threw his head back; he fired at Dave's shoulder but the investigator's movement sent the slug smashing into Dave's collarbone. The stocky man fell into a chair cursing thickly; his gun thudded to the floor.

The girl sprang to get it—Sale called sharply: "Keep your hands off!"—but she had retrieved the weapon and was pointing it at Berry.

"He'd have killed me," she cried. "You saved my life."

"Always glad to assist a client," Sale

said, dryly. "Now, if you'll give me the gun—"

"Of course." She seemed bewildered, held out the gun to him, muzzle first.

Sale reached for it, keeping his own weapon trained on Berry. For just a fraction of a second, she was out of the line of fire.

"Drop the shooter," she called, sharply. "—Or I'll give it to you, Mister Sale."

John let his gun fall to the floor:

"How you've changed, auntie," he said. "What big teeth you have."

She removed her sun-glasses. "Like me better this way, Mister Sale?"

"Much better, Miss Lynn. I'll like you still better when I see you on trial for murder."

The singer shook her head. "No, you wouldn't. Because, honestly, I never had any part in that."

Berry looked up and snarled: "You was in it as much as I was. You put me up to it."

"To the robbery, yes," she agreed; "but not to the stabbing of Senor Fuerga. I warned you there wasn't to be any rough stuff, Dave."

"What am I supposed to do when the high-hat makes a pass at me? Kiss him? I hadda bump him."

"No," she said. "I fought you to keep you from hurting Senor Fuerga—you nearly beat me to death because I did. You don't suppose I'd let you get away with that."

"If I get broiled, babe, you go to the cooking chair, too, and don't forget it," Dave snapped. "Why don't you use some sense? All you got to do is push the button on this gumshoe, and we're in the clear."

Sale laughed. "You don't suppose I'd crash in here without being covered? The headquarters squad will be here at six, sharp."

Berry glanced at his left wrist, where Sale noticed a white streak against the tan of his skin; but he wasn't wearing a wrist watch.

"They can take you back with 'em,"

the wounded man spat out, "and turn you over to the embalmer."

The girl cut in, brusquely: "There's going to be no more killing, if I can help it."

"You can't," Dave snarled. "Either we get him—or he gets us."

The detective laughed again, derisively. "If she falls for that one, you'll put her out of the way next, eh, Dave? You double-crossed her on the emeralds—"

"Shut your yap, dick!" Berry stood up, unsteadily.

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LARA LYNN came a step closer to Berry. "What happened to the emeralds, Dave? You were supposed to sell them and give me my share...."

"It's like I told you, babe. This outfit here can get rid of 'em—but it takes time. I've turned all that green ice over to them, but they got to cut 'em up and sell 'em abroad or else claim they was bought for models to copy this cheap junk after. Either way—"

Sale pointed at the stocky man's chest: "Either way, you're lying, Dave. You've got some of those stones on you, right now."

Berry knelt on one knee, to get Sale's gun, but the girl motioned him back: "Don't make me shoot you, Dave. I will if I have to, but I don't want to." She eyed him suspiciously. "Is Mister Sale right? Have you got any of my emeralds on you?"

Dave cried out in protest: "I swear to—"

"Save it, Dave. You'll need some of that swearing when you get to court. And unless you can explain why you're wearing a pocket ticker when you usually wear a wristwatch, you may need

some cuss words before you go to trial. You wanted to know what time it was a couple of minutes ago, but you wouldn't look at your watch!"

The killer's face had gone pasty white; his eyes were narrowed to mere slits. He stooped to get Sale's gun, ignoring the girl's frantic warning. John kicked hard, caught Berry's outstretched fist.

"Dave!" the girl snapped. "Let's see that watch of yours!"

The murderer stood stock still as she came slowly toward him. His uninjured arm crooked into position for a blow, but she jammed the gun in his ribs and seized the platinum vest-chain roughly, pulled hard.

A huge, old-fashioned gold watch dangled at one end of the chain.

"Open it up," suggested John. "I'll bet you find that watch has more jewels than any you ever saw."

She took her eyes from Berry for the split-second it required to snap open the case. Dave hooked viciously with his good fist and John went into action.

He flung himself down and to one side as Berry's blow went home and

the pistol in the girl's hand exploded. The detective grabbed his own gun and fired from a prone position—the man who had knifed Fuerga put one hand to his side, screamed like an animal in pain and fell back over the chair, moaning.

The girl had staggered back against the wall, from the force of Berry's blow. She was staring at the wounded man's face—but Sale was looking at the gleaming green fire that cascaded over the floor from the open watch-case.

"I'm glad," the girl murmured. "I'm glad you got him...and me, too....I...I never meant any killing to come out of it—"

"You can turn state's evidence," Sale said, "and I'll put in a word for you. You might get off with a light sentence. But Dave isn't dead yet. He'll have to march that mile you've heard about." He pointed to the emeralds. "You better pick up the marbles. Never mind the watch. Dave won't need a watch any more. Time won't mean a thing to Dave; he'll have time...to burn."



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He could foretell the future, but he didn't see his own death—or did he?



DEATH IS INVISIBLE

by JIM HARMON

THE NEAT little man with the frightened face tugged at my sleeve as I stepped off the curb. He motioned in back of him jerkily. Two big men whose faces weren't frightened but sullen and rather sad stared at us silently from the sidewalk.

"Please," said the little man. "Please help me; these men are going to beat me."

The biggest of the big men smiled the saddest of sad smiles and came forward. He extended his billfold towards me. For a second I thought he was offering me money, but then I saw the identification cards. According to them, he was an orderly at the State Mental Hospital. "You understand," he said to me kindly.

The other man came over and took the small man by the shoulders and moved him gently but firmly towards a dark sedan. "Please; you don't understand." His face showed no emotion now at all with the possible exception of a trace of resignation. "You don't understand."

He was wrong. I understood perfectly. I said, "Let him alone, boys, or I'll call a patrolman."

The big man smiled his sad smile and kept coming closer. "You're just a trouble-maker; this is our job, and it's for his own good. Please don't try to interfere."

"You cheap two-bit hood," I said in a conversational tone. "Who do you think you're trying to con? My name's Keller, Bryce Keller; I'm a licensed investigator. I've seen your faces in rogue galleries often enough to see them in my nightmares. I think your name is Ritter. I don't remember his name but I might make a stab at his prison number during a term for one of your muggings."

The other man let go of the undersized intended victim and started towards me; I was a little more to scale. Ritter said, "His name is Sullivan."

Sullivan tried to set around behind

me. I wasn't playing it for a hero.
"Run for a cop, Pal."

Sullivan whirled for the small man instantly, and I drove the edge of a hand down on his exposed neck in a Judo cut. His head snapped back as he stiffened, then toppled sideways like a felled oak. I spun on my heel towards Ritter. He was smiling and holding up his palms. "Please; no more violence. This is just a job and I'm not going to work that hard for the money. We'll leave."

"Sullivan won't; not under his own power."

Ritter shrugged and bent over his partner. I was expecting it when he suddenly started to straighten with a Magnum .357 in his hand. I kicked the gun away, sending it gliding and scraping over the rough surface of the street concrete. Before Ritter could stand, I dug my toe into his adam's apple. He pitched across the unconscious body of Sullivan and began to gag and choke.

The small man watched everything with mesmerized fascination. I took his elbow and guided him out into the street to hail down a cruising cab. We piled in and the big yellow auto roared away.

THE DRIVER was studying his rearview mirror intently. "Say, what happened back there? Did they pass out drunk?"

"Accident," I said.

"They lost an argument with a truck, huh?"

"Something like that."

I told the cabbie to take us through the park; he snickered at the associations the suggestion inspired, and the partition closed.

The little man was still staring ahead of him without blinking. He continued it for several minutes. I knew that that was extremely painful from the time when my face had been completely paralyzed and I could only prop my eyes open or shut. Now I had a little

five-second alarm in my brain that reminded me to blink and sometimes to smile and frown at appropriate times. I kept my set expression at interested thoughtfulness. This man was just looking vacant and stupid—an expression that wasn't justified by his high, finely boned forehead and his wide-set luminous eyes. He should learn the tricks of the trade, I thought.

"Something terrible is going to happen to this taxi," he said after a time.

I took a look behind us, and turned back. "Your friends or their friends aren't following us. Suppose you relax and answer some questions. Who are you and why did you pick a detective out to help you when you were in trouble? I don't believe in coincidence like that."

"I'm Frank Aldrich," he said, still looking ahead of him at something I or no one else could see. "You're right; I knew who you were. Your brother, Johnny, pointed out your photo in a newspaper once. He's very proud of you."

I sat back on that one. "That's news to me. The last time I saw Johnny he told me I was a sucker for working 'for peanuts'—to coin a phrase."

"He's very proud of you," Aldrich persisted.

"Okay, if you say so. Now look, what kind of trouble are you in for a pair of hoods to be after you? Maybe you seen something you shouldn't have? Maybe you didn't pay off on a bad-guess mutual ticket?"

He turned his head like it was on a pivot and looked me in the eyes. "Oh, no, Mr. Keller; quite the opposite. I never guess wrong—that's my trouble. You see I don't guess at all. I know."

"You mean you were in on a fix!"

"No, no, you get misunderstanding me. Everybody misunderstands me. I know which horse will win; I know which fighter will lose. You see, I am infallible."

"You are a swami!"

"I am not a faker anyway you spell it," Aldrich said quietly.

"So what are you?" I asked.

"Have you heard of the experiments of Dr. Rhine in parapsychology—mental phenomenon?"

"You mean that stuff about mental telepathy?" I said, neglecting even to blink. I heard all kinds of lies in my business. "I guess I mean just telepathy, don't I? '-Pathy' means mental if I remember my latin suffixes. I've heard of it, and I understand the experiments are conducted by a charming old gentlemen who trusts everything and everybody. His intentions may be good, but I think there is considerable doubt if the results are equally as good."

ALDRICH leaned forward eagerly. "Yet science has not ever proven conclusively that there is no such thing as telepathy or extra-sensory perception. Rhine's work is still being evaluated. There is a whole tradition of folk lore to support the theory of telepathy, and often folk lore foreshadows scientific fact."

"So they get digitalis out of frogs—and frogs and digitalis were both recommended for heart disease by different kinds of witch doctors. So read my mind."

Aldrich exhaled. "That is not the shape my extra-sensory perception takes. I am gifted with precognition; I can see into the future."

I made a grin. "And you're using that power to bet on horse races. Why not play the stock market? You could really make some money there."

"It requires a large initial investment; I have none. I lived until recently in a small town where I couldn't even place a bet. This is the first time I have been able to travel. Naturally, at my first opportunity, I selected several winners from the board at the horse parlor of Mr. Joe Cardoza—Big Joe Cardoza."

I groaned. "I wonder which came

first? Gangsters with names like that in real life, or gangsters with names like that in second grade movies. Sometimes I think these hoods are just movie fans and putting on an act. But he's a bad actor at that."

The little man nodded. "Undoubtedly he sent those men to beat me up, so I could not show up today and pick my usual winners. Naturally he shows no hostility in person."

"Naturally. The devil! I wish you were a dese, dem and dose guy. It sounds so phoney for a mental giant to talk like a mental giant."

He lifted his pale eyes towards me like a sheep dog. "I am reasonably intelligent; perhaps extra-sensory perception is found among people of lesser intelligence, but they lack the analytical ability to recognize it for what it is and too employ it. Do I correctly surmise that you believe my story?"

I ran the back of my hand under my chin, noting that I was beginning to need a shave. "I believe *you* believe what you say, but it could all be a coincidence. There's something else bothering me right now. Just where did you meet my brother Johnny?"

"Why, at the horse parlor."

I heard myself sigh. "Yeah, that's what I figured. Are you going back there today?"

Aldrich studied nothing again for a moment. "Cardoza will not attempt to throw me out in front of the customers, altho he will undoubtedly try to injure or kill me later—unless you become my bodyguard. I can afford to pay you well. I have made something over two hundred thousand dollars in the last few days."

I nearly choked. "Yeah, I imagine you can swing at least one week's private investigator salary. No wonder Cardoza is after you."

I looked around to see some trees go by and redirected the drive to Cardoza's Pool Hall, an address I knew from bitter experience. Aldrich and I sat silent through the rest of the trip.

As we stopped, I gave the driver a pair of two-dollar bills from my roll of them and got out to hold the door for Aldrich. Clients have a right to expect courtesy, in my opinion.

The cab pulled away, leaving us in the street, when something happened. Brakes squealed; the car spun in a tight circle, then crashed into a light pole with the thunder of buckling metal and the wail of torn metal. Flames danced for a bright moment; then there was a louder echo of thunder, a human wail, a cleansing flash and the heat and shock wave that hit us a block and a half away.

There wasn't anything we could do. I took Aldrich's arm and led him inside as everybody else rushed outdoors past us.

"I told you something terrible was going to happen to that cab," Aldrich remarked.

THE FRONT of the pool hall was dusty and all but deserted. The loafers were men who didn't have the price of a bet or who were being paid the price of a bottle of sneaky pete to hang around and give the outside window dressing.

There wasn't even a guard at the unmarked door in back and we walked into the smokey blue confusion of the bookie joint. Middle-aged and desperate, young and intense, male and female, very poor and almost rich, the players stood or sat at tables marking forms or doodling and all watching the gray smudged listings on the board and listening to the silent Halicrafters speakers with the usual small "h".

Big Joe Cardoza appeared magically out of the milling, sweating mob and came towards us flashing a smile speckled with many gold teeth. His suit was worth about a hundred and probably had cost him four but in it he looked like an aging Irish laborer. Yes, Irish. I didn't know whether his name was phoney or whether he just looked that way. Half the fighters and

wrestlers in the ring with Irish names are Italo-Americans.

"The big hello to you, Frank, and an equally large hello for you, Shamus Keller. Brought him with you to guard your dough if you win, Frank. Smart move; you're a smart boy."

"Honest to gawd, Cardoza," I said, "I wish you would stop going to those cheap movies. Shamus, yet. Where's my brother?"

"Johnny?" He looked puzzled. "Johnny? Why, I ain't seen him since you paid off that little obligation for him."

"That's it, Cardoza. When I have to pay off his debts, you know where you can lay your hands on him; but when he can manage his own sucker stake you can't hardly remember his name. All right, don't beat me over the head with it. Don't beat anybody over the head with anything. Understand?"

"No," Cardoza turned to Aldrich. "You understand, Frank, that I am not obligated to accept your bets. I will, however, but I would like to impose some new restrictions. I am not accusing you of anything dishonest, but occasionally there is a system worked out of beating our wire results. You might have a shortwave set in your car, or your pocket, that gave you the results first so you could rush up and place your bet before our results were announced. I am not accusing you of anything; but before I accept your bets, you'll have to go out to the park with me, and we can watch the results together. Naturally, my odds are better than the track's."

The little man nodded. "Very well, but I warn you again, Joe: I will win. I can't lose; I can foretell the future."

Cardoza smiled his gold and ivory smile. "I appreciate that, Frank. It touches me, but I will take my chances."

I listened to all of this silently and then I said: "I've got some regulations of my own, Cardoza. We'll all three stick together all of the time, even if

one of us has to wash his hands; and if Ritter or Sullivan or any of your hoods try to harm my client, I'll shoot you. Not to kill but where it will hurt."

The hoodlum put the inevitable cigar in the middle of his flashy grin. "I can see the three of us are going to get along fine."

THETRACK was a large scale re-production of the betting room but under open skies and the people were staring at a vacant oval of dirt instead of silent loudspeakers. The breeze was fresher but the jammed bodies were just as stale. We got in on the rail and Cardoza picked up a tout to run his own bets with the track.

I noticed Aldrich studying the form with a puzzled frown on his face. "This is odd. Jolly Boggs appears in my mind but Harlan's Fix keeps blotting it out vaguely. But Jolly Boggs is much stronger. I shall bet forty thousand on Jolly Boggs."

Cardoza nodded mechanically. "Covered. And ten grand on Harlan's Fix with the track, Shakey."

The tout jumped like a rabbit and disappeared. He would probably cut his mother's throat for the money to buy a short beer, and he was carrying a quarter million of Cardoza's money because Big Joe was too lazy to go the windows himself. But Shakey wouldn't run away with it. He literally wouldn't live a half hour and Shakey wanted to live. You can't get drunk when you're dead.

I leaned over the rail to watch the race. It was Harlan's Fix all the way, challenged briefly by Doc Barrett. Jolly Boggs seemed to start to make his move once or twice but faltered to come in third.

Shakey returned shortly after with the results of a hundred \$100 tickets. I philosophised moodily that I hadn't even had a two-dollar bill riding on the nose.

Aldrich was staring at the racing form again. "This is impossible. I never

experience two variable probabilities in a row—yet Obvious Gangster keeps fading in over Bored Robert. Once again, though, I will bet on my strongest impulse: Bored Robert."

I was pretty well convinced that my client was a hoaxer. I watched the race with relative boredom myself for Bored Robert, since I didn't have any money on him. He took the lead early but his gait faltered as Harlan's Fix had done. I leaned over the rail as he went past. There was something suspicious about both horses losing their stride. The jockey wasn't pulling him in as far as I could tell but I wasn't an expert. Then I noticed the dazzling white spot dancing across the horses' nose.

Grabbing Aldrich's arm, I dragged him through the crowd towards something I had seen only a little ways up the line. Somebody was using a mirror to blind the horses. Not just an ordinary pocket mirror, but something like a highly polished optical lens mirror. The crowd parted reluctantly and Aldrich held back, but I shouldered through and got to my man.

My brother Johnny had the mirror inside his hat, catching the sunlight and casting only a narrow beam into the eyes of the horse. I chopped my hand across the hat and it sailed off revealing the thing that looked like a shallow glass dish.

I let my breath out, very so slowly. "This is how you've been paying off your gambling losses, huh, Johnny. Working for Cardoza. You said you were giving up the ponies after I paid off your account with Big Joe last time."

Bored Robert thundered in first over the finish line as Johnny stood watching me, a silent man in a world of people and noise. He was thin and not so tall as me. He was sharp, anyway you looked at him—just sharp enough to be stupid.

Johnny picked up his defiance from somewhere, maybe out of the thin brassy air. "I have to make a living,

don't I? It's easy for a big, muscle-bound guy like you to make the peanuts he needs. You haven't been in a sanitarium for your lungs; you don't have no taste for really good things."

I started to hit him, because that's all I knew to do. He had been getting into jams as long as I could remember and I had to get him out, and I had to hit him to make him do what had to be done. But something stopped me. The fine optical mirror Johnny held exploded into dust in silence. I knew what that meant.

Aldrich looked surprised when I pushed him off his feet. I yelled, "Stand back. Give this man air." I knew what the crowd would do. They gathered tight around us, murmuring a wordless chant of speculation and excitement. They got between the three of us and whoever was shooting at us with a silencer.

CARDOZA smiled when we all rejoined him. "What was keeping you, Frank? Here's your money." He handed over a nine by twelve envelope of heavy yellow paper. "Three hundred thousand dollars. I wouldn't count it here, though."

Aldrich thanked him, and added, "I won't be taking any more of your money, Joe. I have over a half million dollars now. It will satisfy my needs for the rest of my life."

"However long that may be, huh?" Big Joe said. "Well, let's celebrate the end of a pleasant relationship at the track restaurant."

Nobody had mentioned Johnny, and Johnny hadn't spoken, but we all headed towards the restaurant.

"Aldrich," I said, "just for the sake of argument, do you know when you are going to die?"

He shook his head and it seemed he went a little pale. "No; I guess I have some kind of mental block against that. No one wants to know when they will die—so if I do receive the information by some paranormal means, my con-

scious mind refuses to accept the information of my subconscious."

We entered the restaurant and were seated. I smoked a cigaret and studied Johnny's face until we were served Cannibal-burgers and fruit drinks. I put my fork to the open face sandwich and thought about the state of civilization. I looked around at the others eating theirs.

Aldrich was just cutting off his first bite, and I stopped him from taking it. I grabbed his wrist. "Look at that meat, Mr. Aldrich. It isn't beef, it's pork sausage."

"What about it, Shamus?" Cardoza asked stiffly.

"I don't believe in coincidence. Why did only Aldrich get a pork sandwich? Raw pork is dangerous to eat any time, and I'll bet you seen to it that this particular pork was deadly—loaded with trichinosis germs. Trichinosis was often mistaken for Black Plague a few centuries ago; Aldrich would have been dead by tomorrow noon if he had eaten that pork."

Cardoza jumped up, red faced. "That's fantastic."

Aldrich paled again. "Fantastic, but undoubtedly true. I see it now. I told you I wouldn't take any more of your money, Mr. Cardoza, and you have reason to trust my word. Yet you went ahead in this attempt to kill me. You are no longer trying to scare me off with violence; you are determined on killing me for revenge."

Cardoza glared and said nothing. Aldrich said, "Take me home, will you, Mr. Keller."

Johnny had been trying to make himself small and inconspicuous. I laid my hand on his shoulder. "You're coming with us, Kid."

ALDRICH had a furnished room over on the West side in an out of place, old-fashioned Brownstone. The single room was large and cluttered with many things. The furniture in-

cluded an iron bedstead, several tables, a number of chairs, stuffed and straight-back, and a shellacked wooden icebox. There was a look of decaying green and rust to the place. The one big window was covered with iron grill-work and there was a fireplace in one wall. The three of us stood in the single doorway.

The little man went into the room and sat down on the bed. "I'm very tired," he said, and lay down, putting the envelope with over a quarter million dollars in it on the night table.

I picked up a straight-back chair and took it into the hall to sit it in front of the door. "Sit down there," I told Johnny.

He sat down apprehensively. "What do you want me here for? I don't have to help you earn your lousy little fees. If you had any sense, you'd be making real money."

"And I'd be sitting in the chair instead of you; you're going to sit there until somebody shoots at you."

Johnny started to get up with slow caution.

"Sit down or I'll knock you down," I said. "You promised me to stay away from Cardoza after I bailed you out of a jam last time. You owe me something."

I went inside and closed the door all but a crack.

"What makes you think anybody is going to shoot me?" he asked tightly.

"Shoot at you. They shot that mirror out of your hands at the park, didn't they? And I just figured out that a stray bullet from a gun equipped with a silencer must have been what caused a cab we had been riding in to crash. The slug must have hit one of the tires. But I don't think the slugs will hit you. It's a fallacy that professional gunmen don't care how many murders—"

The bullet whined into the door jam and splintered the wood.

"Bryce!" Johnny half-screamed, half-whispered.

They were a little earlier than I had

expected. Ritter and Sullivan were trying to scare Johnny off, so they would have a clear field with Aldrich. Glancing around the door frame I caught a glimpse of someone at the turn of the hall. Then he was gone.

"Stay here!" I told Johnny. "Keep Aldrich inside and anybody else out!"

Jerking out my .45, I ran down the hall. As I got to the turn, I slowed and suddenly threw myself around the corner. Something very hard crashed into my skull, something like a gun butt, and through summer lightening I sank into the lonely black cave of unconsciousness.

DAYLIGHT seeped back into my eyes and I dragged myself up the wall and flowed around the bend. I managed to reel back to Johnny and Aldrich's door.

"What happened?" Johnny asked.

It seemed too stupid a question to answer. "No one went in while I was out—and I do mean out, don't I...?"

"No. Of course not. I stuck right here."

I looked in to see if Aldrich was all right. He wasn't; he was lying dead in front of a blazing fireplace.

I closed the door. "All right, Johnny. Did you kill him, or did you let Ritter or Sullivan or Cardoza in to do the job?"

Johnny licked his lips. "I'm telling you, Bryce, nobody went in there; ask Aldrich."

I hit him. I always had to hit him to make him do the right thing, to get out of the messes he made. Only this time, I suddenly realized, there was no out if he was guilty. I had to give him the benefit of the doubt because I couldn't accept my own brother as a murderer.

He looked up at me with blood on his mouth. "Big strong guy, aren't you? You've never been in a sanitarium for your lungs."

"Come on," I said. I helped him up and we went inside.

The body was on the floor in front



of the cheery fire on the hearth that made the room insufferably hot. There was a wound in his heart but no knife. I touched the spot and it was very wet.

"Where's the knife?" I asked from where I knelt, without looking at Johnny.

"What knife?" He sounded guilty—but I remembered that he always sounded guilty about everything, because inside, he suspected he was guilty for everything.

"Don't you see, Johnny?" I asked him. "You've got to be in on the murder if you're lying to me about who came into this room; and you're lying because there isn't any way Aldrich could have been killed in this room."

"Is that so?" Cardoza's voice demanded. "You two guys could have killed him together."

I got up and turned to face Big Joe who stood in the doorway. "We didn't, though, and I don't really believe you think we did."

There was defiance in his eyes for a moment, but Cardoza lowered his gaze. "Was he really killed in here with you two just outside? It's impossible...like the way he could always pick a winner."

I began to see something. "Maybe he decided to die."

"You mean he took the pipe?" Johnny asked a little too eagerly.

I shook my head, keeping my attention on Cardoza. "How can a man stab

himself in the heart and then get rid of the weapon? No, it wasn't like that. Aldrich knew Cardoza was going to kill him like he knew other things. He didn't let him have the chance—*this time*."

"What d'you mean—this time?" Cardoza demanded.

I SHRUGGED. "A man who can tell the future and kill himself without a weapon might be able to do a lot more. Maybe this is only one of his bodies; maybe he has another one that he went to, to wait until he can even the score. You hounded him to death, remember? You and your hoods. Or maybe he switched bodies with Johnny or me or one of your men. Maybe what you see there is the mortal remains of Sullivan, and Sullivan is really Aldrich just waiting to kill you."

"I'm getting out of here!" Cardoza shouted; "you're nuts!"

I didn't try to stop him.

"You'll have that guy jumping at every shadow the rest of his life," Johnny said.

"That," I said, "is the idea—Aldrich's idea." I crossed to the table where a quarter million dollars lay in a brown envelope. I took out five hundred for my fee.

"You were conning Cardoza, weren't you?" he asked.

I pocketed the bills. "Yes. I think Aldrich really could see into the future—precognition, he called it. But his powers were limited; he couldn't even foresee his own death. He killed himself because he knew Cardoza would eventually. He did it by natural means, but in a way to keep Big Joe wondering and worrying for the rest of his life."

"How?"

I pointed. "What do you see over there?"

Johnny's eyes widened. "An icebox. And where there's an icebox, there's an ice-pick."

"You mean he stabbed himself in the

heart, walked over to the icebox, lifted the lid, dropped the ice-pick in, closed the lid, walked over in front of the fireplace and laid down to die? After being stabbed in the heart?"

I knelt by the body and touched the wet spot over his heart. It was drying rapidly in front of the hot fire. "Aldrich's chest is wet—but not with blood. A man hardly bleeds at all when he is stabbed in the heart. That wetness is water." Aldrich chipped off a piece of ice to razor sharpness and used it as a dagger, trusting the fire he had

built to melt it. It became an invisible weapon, an invisible death." I stood up. "I'll let the police see if they can figure it out. You can get out of here; they'd probably make it tough on you."

"Thanks, Bryce," he said with something almost like affection.

"And stay out of trouble," I said.

Johnny paused a second at the door. "After this, I will!"

But I didn't think he would.



NO BURGLARS, PLEASE!

by E. E. Clement

YOU AND the wife have just returned from a two weeks' vacation at the seashore. You open the door to your apartment, or house; you enter, and wife gives one loud scream. "We had burglars!"

You do a little quick checking. The gold wrist watch in the bureau drawer is missing; the sixty dollars you hid in the desk has vanished; and the bonds you hid under the mattress are no longer there. Every personal item of clothing has been thrown across the floor. Seems they checked every possible hiding place for your valuables and found them—even the two rings your wife hid in her shoes. Next you call the police and ask them to send over a detective. He listens to your story and seems amused when you say to him. "Aren't you going to dust for fingerprints?"

There is nothing mysterious about the techniques the burglars used to discover you weren't at home, or the way they entered your place.

If you live in an apartment house, the "spotter" for the gang or the lone wolf peeps into the mail boxes during the summer. If he sees a stack of mail piled up inside, he assumes correctly that you are away. Or it may be a dead

give away if you post a notice. "Mailman, don't send me any second class mail or circulars." If you go away for the weekend, be certain to inform the milkman and the newsboy. Otherwise the "spotter" may be making a quick routine check on each floor. He notices the bottles of milk outside your door, and also the collection of newspapers. How bright does he have to be to deduce that you are away?

Many people who go away for a vacation shut up every window, and pull down every window shade or venetian blind. The "spotter" is making rounds of a neighborhood. He looks up to the second floor and watches that apartment. He comes back at night and rings the doorbell. No answer; that means you are away.

Now and then, you may find a person who passes on data about you to the burglar. The average person talks too much about himself in the presence of strangers. All you did was to boast to the local grocer.

"We took a cottage at the seashore for three weeks. We are going to leave this Sunday. See you when we come back."

That meek little woman with the shopping bag took in every word. You

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THE BIG SQUAWK

by THOMAS THURSDAY

Like most practical jokers, Jack Kane didn't appreciate a joke played on him—especially when it connected him with a killing.



JACK KANE, of the *Herald*, got the first reporter's break. He was the second to see the fast-stiffening body of Dan Hammerton, big shot gambler and bolita king, complete with private harem. The first to see the corpse was Dick Tate, ace bellhop and ice-water carrier. Dick had brought up the last mail to Hammerton's room but his knock got no answer. He entered the room with his pass key. Hammerton was on the bedroom floor, of the three-room hotel suite, and he wasn't playing marbles by himself. Fully dressed, hands outstretched almost straight from his body, Hammerton was cured of his insomnia for all time.

Beside the body was a .32 Colt. The bellhop rushed to the elevator and descended to the lobby. There he met Kane, and the two went back to the Hammerton suite.

"Look," said Kane, "how about keeping your big mush shut for awhile? Here's where I scoop the step-ins off Pete Rundell."

Rundell covered Headquarters for the *News*. He was a quiet, efficient reporter—not the phoney type you see in the movies, TV, or hear on the radio. He was a six-footer, but had no protruding jaw. Not that his jaw denoted

effeminacy; those who got the wrong idea about his gentility, and got out of line, soon found themselves against a Dempsey right and a Marciano left.

Jack Kane was the opposite of Rundell, especially in character. Even among his fellow reporters he was as popular as arsenic on caviar. His idea of a practical joke had once included phoning Rundell, disguising his voice, and telling him that the mayor had just committed suicide. This would have been pleasant news for most of the citizens, as His Honor was as popular as icebergs along Miami Beach during the tourist season.

Kane, back in the suite, stepped around the body of Hammerton as if it was about to explode. He had sense enough not to touch it or anything in the vicinity. If he had, and Capt. Chester Eldredge, head of the Homicide Bureau, learned about it, Kane would have been tossed through a window.

Evidently Hammerton had been shot through the heart. If the motive was robbery, somebody overlooked the three-caret diamond ring still on his middle finger. Thick, coagulated blood, smeared his white shirt and part of the heavy, blue-green carpet.

SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

"Looks like suicide," said the bellhop.

"Nuts," said Kane. "This bum was knocked off. How long has he been stopping at the Lowndes Hotel?"

"About all winter. Went to the Hialeah and Tropical tracks every day. A swell ginzo, if you ask me; his idea of a tip was another guest's idea of a week's rent."

"Did he have a lot of dames come up to his suite?"

"Sure; he had a keen eye for a doll, and he had plenty," said Dick.

"Do you recall the last dame who paid him a visit?"

"Yeah; about 9 last night. Boy, she had more curves than a Coney Island scenic railway. You take Marilyn Monroe, and I'll settle for her."

"Can you describe her?"

"You should know."

"What do you mean, *I* should know?"

"I mean," grinned Dick Tate, "that she is the same baby I been seeing you around with for the last two months."

Dick must have meant Mabel McCoy, and Jack Kane knew it—and also her. She was one of the telephone operators at the *Herald*. The fact that Dick knew about this affair—which Kane imagined was positively clandestine—made him wonder how many others knew about it. But not his wife, he hoped. And then another angle supplanted his first worry, viz.—she must have been lying to him when she said she was going to her mother for the night! Why, the two-timing little bum!

Kane forgot to remind himself that he in turn, had told Mabel McCoy that he was going to go home and catch up with some reading. Instead, he went to the *Toy Coy Club*—a strip joint—and got home four sheets in the wind, the breeze being alcoholic.

KANE'S ATTENTION was attracted to the large front window. In the center was a big cage, and in it an aristocratic-looking parrot. "Does

that thing say anything?" he asked the bellhop.

"I'll say he can; you should listen to the little rascal some time."

An idea popped into Kane's head. It came from seeing a recent movie, which proves the idea could not have been too hot or original. In the Hollywood hashish, a parrot had squawked the name of the killer, and thus solved the case. If this gag worked in real life, every police department, including the FBI and Scotland Yard, would have a dozen parrots on the staff.

"Listen, Dick," said Kane, "would you be interested in an easy buck? All you have to do is keep your mug shut and go blind."

"For a buck, I ain't even been in the hotel for weeks. What's the lowdown?"

"I want you to sneak this bird down in the hotel cellar, and hide it near the boilers. I'll drop down later and sneak it out the garbage entrance. When the dumb wonders from police headquarters come around, and you can bet they will, you know nothing from zero. Right?"

"Right." He unhooked the cage from the stand.

"*What's hot for today?*" squawked the bird.

"What did he say?" asked Kane.

"You mean you didn't get it?" demanded Dick. "Hell, he speaks as good as we do!"

"*Play 'em across the board!*" went on the parrot.

"Looks like a flock of race track guys hung around here," figured Kane. "O.K., take him down to the cellar, and don't forget you are deaf, dumb and blind."

"Yeah," grinned Dick, "make like I'm a reporter for the *News*; hey?"

"Look; buster," snorted Kane, "don't confuse the *News* with the *Herald*. On the *Herald*, we all have to know how to read, and spell a little."

Kane dialed Miami P.D. "Gimme Homicide," he told the City of Miami operator.

"Homicide, Eldredge speaking," said a cultivated voice, belonging to Det. Chester Eldredge.

"Jack Kane. Would you be interested in a dead gambler in a hotel room?"

"If it's a police reporter, named Kane," said the captain, "I'd be delighted."

"He looks like a dumb cop," said Kane, "only his feet ain't quite big enough. I'm calling from Suite B, Hotel Lowndes. The late departed is resting quietly less than a foot from where I am."

"If you dare touch anything, you mullethead, I'll toss you headfirst into the can. How come you got there first?"

"Intuition," laughed Kane. "Something all cops need, but don't have."

WHILE KANE waited for Captain Eldredge to reach the scene, he phoned Rundell. "How's everything, Rip Van Winkle? And I'm sorry I woke you up."

"What's the purpose of the call, Kane?" asked Rundell.

"Oh, not much; just thought you and your blatter might be interested in a brand new, fresh-off-the-gun murder. For the full and complete details, you can read all about it in the *Herald*."

"Thanks," said Rundell. "May I ask where you are phoning from?"

"Hotel Lowndes, Suite B. As to the scene, the deceased is staring at me out of his right eye. He's kind of a nosy stiff; don't you think?"

"I'll drop around," said Rundell.

Shortly after, Pete Rundell entered the gaudy lobby of the hotel. External-ly, everything appeared quiet and normal—at least for a hotel that catered to the racetrack tourist trade. Any guy, standing or sitting, who did not have a tip sheet or one of the racing rags in his hand, was considered a strange character.

Rundell asked the desk clerk, a bizo named Calbert Front—appropriate name for a hotel clerk—informed the

News man that he would rather not discuss the unpleasantness in Suite B. It was Mr. Front's experience, long and painful, that the closer he kept his mouth the wider open would be his job. He recalled, only last season, when a high-flyer named Blinky Dinky—known to police as Roscoe Timms—was bounced off with a .38 in Room 13, which was not his lucky number. He had told the police and reporters all he knew about the matter, while the manager was out of town; and when the manager read the juicy details in the papers, Mr. Calbert Front had to keep cotton in his ears for a week.

The Hotel Lowndes was beginning to get a rather sour reputation, and it yearned for a sweet one. Could the management help it if a flock of floopies used his joint to add dividends to the undertaker's business? Did people expect them to mug and finger-print all guests before they permitted them to register? Hell—if they ever passed such a law, at least half of the Miami Beach hotels would be empty.

Pete Rundell took the elevator to Suite B. Captain Eldredge, head of Homicide, along with his aides, Det. Irv Whitman and Det. George Spell, were checking the scene. Jack Kane was telling the officers all he wanted them to know, which was none too much. He also was good enough to give them advice on how to work on the case—which information he got directly from movies, TV and radio murder plays. Eldredge, however, did not care for any knowledge Kane may have in the detectival line, since his department had led the entire nation in 1954 in the solution of murders, i.e., 26 out of 26.

"I have no doubt that this mug was wiped out," Kane was saying, mostly to himself, as no one was listening if they could help it.

"Then we might as well go home and let this news eagle take care of things," said Irv Whitman.

"Mr. Kane should know," said Cap-

tain Eldredge. "He knows everything else."

JUST THEN, Frank Mullady, of the CID Bureau, raised himself from the body of Hammerton, and said, "Good marksmanship. Straight through the heart. Davy Crockett couldn't have done better, even with Walt Disney making the picture."

"See if you can get the maid who takes care of the department," said the captain to Whitman. "She might know something."

"If she knew anything," cracked Kane, "why in hell should she be a maid?"

Her name was Mary McCracken, and she was toil-worn and wrinkles creased her forehead and hands.

"Did you see Mr. Hammerton often?" asked Eldredge.

"Yes, sir. Yes, indeed, I did. Practically all the time he was a guest here; and I must say he was one fine gentleman."

"Did you happen to hear a shot, or any extraordinary noise?" asked Whitman.

"No, sir; not a sound. Poor Mr. Hammerton, and him tipping every time he looked at me."

"Imagine what Marilyn Monroe would get!" snorted Kane.

"Shut up," said the captain, and he meant it.

Pete Rundell never said a word, and so the boys liked Pete. While the quizz was going on, Rundell looked around the suite, without getting in the way of the officers. There were three rooms, sitting or living room, bedroom, and kitchenette. Pete went to the bedroom clothes closet, unobserved by Kane, and found ten suits, expensive suits, and one fancy vest hanging on the crossbar. The vest belonged to the suit that Hammerton was now wearing.

Sticking out of one of the vest pockets Rundell saw a small slip of paper. He removed it, read it, and

smiled briefly. Then he put it in his pants pockets and rejoined the group in the sitting room.

"How's it look, Captain Eldredge?" he asked the homicide chief.

"This lipstick," said Whitman to no one in particular, "indicates that a woman was mixed up in this some place."

"Nice deduction," laughed Kane. "How about looking in my BVD's and seeing if you can find her name? By the way, where did you find the lipstick?"

"Where the hell do you think I found it—down the lavatory drain? You get in my hair."

"Which one?" grinned Spell.

Kane was wondering how he had missed the lipstick. He had sniffed around everything else—which is strictly against police rules and regulations, regardless of what you read, hear, or see on TV and radio. So when you see it done in the movies, demand your money back.

Pete Rundell started to leave, as quietly as he had entered.

"Where you headed, scoop boy?" demanded Kane.

"Maybe out for some fresh air," said Pete.

AS PETE was half through the entrance, Mabel McCoy, breathless and excited, brushed past him and into the apartment. Mabel was not what the tabloids call "attractive" or "beautiful." Such blatters have those two words always handy in standing type, and just toss them in when any old bag gets in the news.

"Oh, Jack," said Mabel. "I need your help!"

For a long moment, Kane was silent. Fright, wonderment and anger played across his puffy face. "So you're in the middle of this, are you?" he finally said, and sarcasm dripped like Niagara Falls off each word.

"Certainly not!" she shot back. "All

I did was to deliver a message to Mr. Hammerton last night."

"Who gave you this message?" asked Captain Eldredge.

"Pete Rundell, of the *News*," said Mabel.

The face of Kane went passed red and began to technicolor. "Well, I'll be double damned! So you're not only a two-timer, you admit you are a three-timer. And what did this guy, Hammerton, mean to you?"

"Absolutely nothing. Not a thing in this world."

"What about giving me a standoff last night, and then meeting Pete Rundell?" roared on Kane. While this exchange of courtesies was going on, the homicide officers looked at each other, with a single expression on their faces, viz., "What are these persons doing here?"

"It was by mere chance that I met Mr. Rundell," said Mabel. "He asked me if I would care to do him a favor, and I said I would be glad to."

"You dames are all the same," snorted Kane. "You would double-cross anybody, if you could gain something for yourselves."

"I told you I was going right home, and I was—until I met Mr. Rundell. Besides, what right have *you* to question me? I'm not married to you!"

"That's a break for me," sneered Kane. Turning to Captain Eldredge, he said, "How about asking this babe and Rundell what they know about Hammerton's death?"

"I don't know what the man is talking about," said Rundell, "and I doubt if he does. But if Kane is referring to the note I asked Miss McCoy to deliver to Mr. Hammerton, why, I can explain that easy."

"Explain it," said Kane.

"I had been trying to contact Hammerton on the phone for a day or two without any luck. So I decided to write a note and then sent it to his suite by messenger. I chanced to meet Miss

McCoy, and since he was going in that direction, she was gracious enough to say she would deliver it for me. Do I have to hide behind the Fifth Amendment for a little innocent thing like that?"

"Was there anything between you and Hammerton?" asked Kane. Captain Eldredge walked over to Kane, and said, "Since when did you join the Homicide Bureau? I'll do the interrogating here, and you can shut up—or get tossed out."

"I'm just trying to help you," said Kane.

"You can help us," sniffed Detective Whitman, "by jumping out the window."

"Was Hammerton a personal friend of yours, Rundell?" asked Eldredge.

"I never met the man in my life, although I had heard about him. As you all know, he was quite a character in sporting and gambling circles. The truth is, I do a little magazine writing aside from my newspaper work; I wanted to contact him to see if I could get his life story, and make an article from it. And that is all my note was about."

"Sounds reasonable and logical to me," said Detective George Spell, his big black-brown eyes giving Kane a sniffy look.

"You and Rundell sleep together?" demanded Kane.

Spell walked over in front of Kane, doubled his right fist, and said, "Look, clunkhead, you can get away with this butting-in via fiction on the radio, movies and TV; but in real life, it doesn't work. If Captain Eldredge wasn't a gentleman, he'd have you thrown out of the place."

"Oh, let the half-ape alone," laughed the captain. "In this homicide racket I like a little comedy relief, and Kane can always be depended on to supply it." Then, turning toward the maid and the rest, he added, "I must ask all of

you to be in my office, third floor at Headquarters, tomorrow morning at 9:30 A.M. Meantime, you are all released on your own honor until that time."

PETE RUNDELL was the first to leave the suite. He caught an elevator just as it was leaving the floor, and beat the others down. He ran into Dick Tate in the lobby. The little bellhop liked Pete, and the quiet reporter respected Dick.

"Boy, have I got some hot stuff for you!" whispered Dick, leading Rundell to one side of the lobby. Pete followed the bellhop behind a set of artificial palm trees, which looked better than the real ones.

"Listen," began Dick, "for the first time in my life I am going to be a double-crosser. I figure this way—when you are dealing with a wrongo guy, you gotta beat the bum to the punch."

"So?" asked Rundell.

"So Jack Kane gives me a whole buck—which may be counterfeit for all I know, like him. Anyway, he pays me to take a parrot that was in Hamerton's suite down to the basement, and not tell anybody, specially the police."

"You should know better than to fool with police evidence," warned Pete.

"Yeah, I know; but I had you in mind, see; and I know you will make everything come out okay."

"Let's get down to business," said Rundell. "For two bucks, you will forget the one buck; right?"

Dick Tate looked pained, hurt and altogether offended.

"Is that all you think of me, Pete?" he demanded. "Why, you know I wouldn't take a C-note from you. Besides, can't a guy do a favor once in awhile, without getting cash for it? If you ask me, that's what the hell is the trouble with this commercialized world. If I was Eisenhower—"

"Okay; Dick," grinned the reporter. "I apologize. Now, what's it all about?"

"Just sneak down in the basement," said Dick, "and look around the boiler room. You will see a parrot. The rest is up to you."

Less than a hour later, Pete Rundell was noseying around the apartment where Jack Kane lived with his wife. She was out, being employed as a night telephone operator. The door was unlocked, one of Kane's major habits; moonlight flooded through the living-room windows.

Pete wanted that parrot, and badly. When he had failed to find it in the hotel basement, he put two and two together and made Jack Kane. But if the parrot was not there, then Pete's somewhat screwy idea was down the wet drain. The bright moonlight gave him good sight in every part of the apartment. He began to think his search was fruitless, when a welcome sound came from under the bed.

"Play Marie Antoinette to win!" squawked the bird. Pete, startled at the sudden sound breaking the stillness, recovered and yanked the cage and bird out from under the bed. Next, he got a small white cloth from the table and covered the cage. Obviously the parrot did not care for the restricted view; it began to recite sailor-and-marine words, with a touch of the army for a chaser.

"Oh, I'm a son-of-a-witch and I got the itch!" remarked the bird. Putting the cage under his arm, Pete hoped the little bum would keep quiet, at least until he got out of the house. The parrot, for reasons only known to himself, kept super-mum until he got halfway down the block.

RUNDELL REACHED the corner, found a taxi driver who was not only awake, but also half-sober, and gave directions to drive to the Tropic Pet Shop, which stayed open until midnight. "Okay, pal," said the driver.

"Just another dog!" remarked the parrot, from under the cover. The driver, feeling assured that he was being insulted by a fresh passenger, was about to work his temper into high gear, when Pete pacified him.

"Pay no attention to my little friend," laughed Rundell. "He was owned by a racetrack man, and he's just reciting some track jargon he's heard. I have named him Silent Sam, because he's always belching about something."

Pete raised the white covering and gave the driver a peek.

"Cute little louse, ain't he?" said the driver. "He kin speak real English, can't he?"

The cab came in front of the pet shop. Just as Pete was paying the taxi trooper, a shapely brunette—a Marilyn Monroe in reverse—came wiggling down the street.

"Just a dime-a-dozen filly!" said the parrot, much to Rundell's embarrassment. The young lady, belonging to the Miss America class, stopped as if hit with a club, and glared at Pete. He did not pause to hear her forth-coming lecture but dashed into the shop.

"I wonder if you have a parrot in stock that will match my little pal, here," he asked the slick-haired clerk. The clerk gazed at the bird in the manner of Henry the Eighth looking down on a peasant.

"Naturally," said the pet patootie, with his best snooty-snotty eye-brow raise. "It is the most common variety extant. In fact, I might say they are a drug on the market. Right now we must have at least ten in stock."

"Boy, what a bum!" squawked the parrot.

"Is it possible that this common bird is referring to *me?*" demanded the clerk.

"Oh, no," said Pete. "He belonged to a racetrack fellow, and just picked up the racing terms."

"You can see that his owner was

highly cultured and genteel," sniffed the clerk.

"I would like to board him here for a few days," said Pete, "and in his place, I'd like to rent one for the same period. I am fully aware that it sounds a bit strange—perhaps silly—but I have good personal reasons."

"I—er think it can be arranged," said the clerk.

"What a dog!" remarked the bird, as Rundell paid the clerk.

"More horse talk," grinned Pete.

"I'm *sure* he was not referring to me," sniffed the clerk.

"Don't bet on it!" yooped the parrot.

The clerk decided he was in bad company, went to the rear of the store and returned to Rundell with a twin to the Hammerton squawker.

Pete gave the taxi trooper his home address and, after arrival, spent half the night teaching the parrot to squawk tasty words. The words were potent and important. When he finally heard the bird repeat them, he grinned impishly.

So far, his luck was good; but he wondered if it would hold up. He knew he had to get the substitute bird into Jack Kane's apartment, and back under the bed. He figured that Kane would not be at home, knowing that Jack would stay away from the apartment two and three days at a time, depending on the blonde or brunette dish he had intrigued.

The Kane apartment was as dark as the inside of an eightball. Taking no risks, Pete listened at the door, wondering if Kane was out or maybe asleep, drunk or sober. No sounds of snoring came from the bedroom. Rundell rubber-soled in and placed the bird under the bed. His luck going out was good, and he took a bus home.

NEXT MORNING, all appeared in the interrogation room of Captain Eldredge. The captain ordered Detec-

tive Spell to take them down to the ID Bureau, where Frank Mullady and Alex Russak took their prints. This was done to check against the prints raised in the Hammerton suite. The mugging and printing gave Jack Kane a kick; he had a sense of humor like a starved tomcat at a convention of mice.

After checking the prints against the gun, Frank Mullady turned to Eldredge and stated, "There are three classifications of prints on this gun. None of them match any one now present."

"Did you ever touch this gun?" asked Captain Eldredge, to Kane.

"You kidding?" demanded the hot-shot reporter. "You know I would never touch anything like that."

(If no one was looking, he'd touch the gold horde in Fort Knox).

"He only touches bottles, marked 100 proof," said Detective Whitman.

Kane ignored Whitman's *bon mot*, and said to Eldredge, "Isn't somebody going to ask Mabel McCoy what she was doing in Hammerton's apartment, or would that be too personal?"

"I have told the truth," said Miss McCoy, "but the mind of some persons is so muddy that they can't tell when the clear truth flows in."

"How do the officers know that you and Pete Rundell have not been working some kind of smoocher with Hammerton?" asked Kane.

"Gentlemen," said Rundell, quietly, "I think this rudeness to Miss McCoy has gone far enough."

"Continue," sniffed Kane. "Your knight-in-armor act is beginning to make me ill. Was Sir Walter Raleigh an ancestor of yours?"

"I think now is the time for someone to confess," said Whitman.

"Don't tell me that you are about to confess that you killed Hammerton over Miss McCoy!" said Kane.

"If I should ever be stupid enough to kill *any* one," replied Whitman, "I imagine you will be Public Victim No. 1."

"I've had enough of this Jackie Gleason and Burns and Allen liverwurst, ladies and gentlemen," said Eldredge. "I want facts, minus the fancies."

Kane strutted around the Bureau as if he had an ace in the hole. Make it three holes, two of them in his head. "Well, boys," he finally said, "I guess I have kept you in suspense long enough. I now wish to announce that I have Clue No. 1 in my apartment. If you come with me, I will prove it."

"Listen," said Detective George Spell, "who in hell gave *you* permission to remove clues?"

"I just wanted to assist you guys," said Kane. "How ungrateful can you get!"

FIFTEEN minutes later two black detective cars pulled up in front of Kane's residence. The reporter led the men and Miss McCoy into his apartment. His ace in the hole, of course, was the parrot. He had the weird notion that the bird would talk sooner or later, and thus divulge the killer of Hammerton. This is standard plot No. 2346 X in fiction, and if it worked in books, radio and TV, why in hell wouldn't it work in reality? There are at least 500 reasons why it won't work, but that's another story, not this one.

With a grand gesture Kane lifted the bedspread and yanked out the bird.

"Here you see the key to the mystery," he announced. "Why? Because this parrot was in the room when Hammerton was murdered!"

"For all we know," said Eldredge, "so was you."

The bird flipped its clipped wings and tried to make a few squawks, all sound and fury, signifying rage.

"What is this thing supposed to do," asked Detective Whitman, "give a lecture on Crime and Punishment?"

"If you are playing a joke on me," warned Eldredge, "it's going to be a boomerang." Just then the parrot be-

gan to agitate its wings and flap around the cage.

"Stop, Jack; stop! Don't kill me, Jack!"

The parrot's unexpected words caused all present to mold into wax-works models. The chief statue was Jack Kane.

"Well," said Whitman, "what are we waiting for?"

Kane's fat face changed from deep crimson to shallow technicolor. "Gentlemen; gentlemen!" he said. "This I don't understand. I'm not the Jack he means. Maybe it's the name of a horse."

"With two legs," said Whitman. "What about it, captain?"

"He'll do until a better suspect comes along," agreed Eldredge.

WE NOW TAKE you to the city jail for a view of one Jack Kane. You will note that he is very unhappy, and does not seem to care for his fellow guests—namely, six drunks, five pickpockets, and one alleged pimp. During the first hour of incarceration Mr. Kane threatened to wire Congress, the Supreme Court of the United States, with a few words tossed off in the direction of President Eisenhower. In short, the reporter was irked, annoyed, enraged and altogether in a state of severe shock. Nothing like this could ever possibly happen to him—and it did.

When his own newspaper published a full report of the affair, he began to sue in millions—especially in his mind. Had the world gone nuts? Jack Kane, star reporter, held in jail on suspicion of murder! He began to wonder if nightmares came in the daytime.

Came 3 P.M. the next day. Det. Lieut. Tom Lipe went to the cell block and opened the door. "Okay, Jack," said Lipe, "Take a walk—meaning get the hell out of here."

The item that released him was the story in the *News*, under the by-line of Pete Rundell. The headline for the

story read: **DAN HAMMERTON WAS NOT MURDERED!**

In the report Rundell, for the first time, printed the note he had found in Hammerton's vest pocket. Take a peek:

Blame no one for my death but Dan Hammerton. That's me, public chump for the ages. In a long, wasted life, I have learned a few things the hard way. I have been a gambler all my days. I gambled in women, and I lost; I gambled in horses, and I lost; I gambled in booze, and it was my greatest loss. I have no regrets. I want my body cremated. Goodbye, my friends—if any.

That same night Kane came into Headquarters his same, old cocksure self. At least, he put on a great act of being calm and collected. "Hell," he said to the boys: "I knew all the time it was a little joke. I just went along with the gag."

"Sure," said Detective Whitman, "but I noticed you forgot to laugh."

Pete Rundell looked up Mabel McCoy early the next morning.

"When time interferes with romance," smiled Pete, "it hasn't got a chance. Follow me, lady."

The marriage license bureau was on the seventh floor of the court house, directly across from Headquarters. Over the main entrance hangs two conflicting signs, viz., *Marriage and Hunting Licenses*.

Two women clerks and a balding male looked up when Pete and Mabel entered.

"Who's the two that are going to be married?" asked Mabel. "I don't see any one here, and you told me to come along and see somebody married, didn't you?"

"Calm down, Sugar Plum," said Pete. "You're a big girl now and you know that, before we get married, we must get a license."

"Well!" said Mabel, and she decided to sit down before she fell down.

NO BURGLARS, PLEASE!

(Continued From Page 64)

don't know her but she knows you. She also knows about the fur coat you bought; the new ring your husband gave you; and the six suits you bought last month. She passes on the information to her third cousin for ten percent. He'll ring your phone. If there is no answer, he knows you aren't at home. And perhaps the operator will say to him, "The number has been temporarily discontinued." He can take his time and be choosey while looting your apartment.

How will he enter? Some of these burglars use the celluloid strip trick, which requires a fine technique to move the works inside your lock. Some will even jimmy open the door. Or perhaps a fellow will climb up the fire escape. He places adhesive over the glass, hits it, puts his hand through, and opens the window lock. Or he may use a glass cutter. I know of one burglar who spent weeks in the public library studying about locks until he became an expert. You'd be surprised how easy locks are to open once you know what makes them tick.

ONE TYPE of burglar is known as the "ruse" boy. He doesn't care whether you are home or not. Actually he figures you will be home, wearing your pearls, rings, and your hubby has his cash with him. He rings your bell and says he is the "gas man" or the "phone man" or the "electrician." You open the peephole and see a nice person outside. Then you open the door—and the fun begins, especially after he ties you and hubby up and he and his pal loot the place. He knows where you keep your items and exactly what you have. A ten percenter gave him the dope.

Don't let anyone enter your place unless you have seen their credentials and checked them. First take a good look through the peephole so you get

the person's features lined up. Ask for their credentials—have the caller hold them for you to see, then tell them to wait a moment. Call up the phone company, the gas company, or even the store they claim to represent. Give name, number, and description; don't be surprised if the bird has vanished when you return to the peephole.

Many women in apartment houses have picked up a bad habit. They visit the neighbors for a bit of gossip, or to help with the kids, and leave their door open. The "snatch" burglar goes around apartment houses trying doors. He enters when he finds one open and grabs for something in a hurry.

Always keep that door closed.

Since we are talking about precautions, here are a few more that you might use. Always keep a check list of the serial numbers on the different items in your house, such as the typewriter, the wrist watch, the electric egg-beater, or the portable radio. Keep this check list and your valuable stocks, bonds, and papers, in a safe deposit vault. Reduce your cash at home to a minimum. If you always pay with cash, it won't take long for someone to figure out you must have it at home the day after payday. Use a checking account; it is cheaper in the long run. Take out a burglary police. It won't stop the boys from entering, but at least it will compensate you financially for their visit and removal of your property.

When you go away to the country, inform the neighbor below and to the side of you to keep their eyes open. You will return the same courtesy when they leave for their vacation. If you rig up a time clock to put on a lamp at night and off in the morning, then do so. And don't blab too much about what you earn, wear, and do; after all, you don't want burglars to visit you.



THE FACE OF NEMESIS

Novelet

by REUBEN JENNER

THE SMALL waiting room of the Monahan Pass station of the Denver & White Horse Railroad was dim with the flickering light of an oil lamp that hung from the wooden ceiling. Behind the wire partition, with its little wicket which was the ticket window, Arthur Sloane, the station agent, sat at his table, clicking the telegraph key. It was routine work; he would be finished in a moment. The last train for the night, now at nine o'clock, had gone down through the cut toward Denver, an hour away.

Outside, it was snowing. The great ragged, darkly purple mountains were obliterated. The gleaming rails of the single track were in places swept bare by the wind, with fleecy drifts piling against the walls of the cut. Sloane presently finished his dispatches. For a moment he sat listening to the howl of the wind as it lashed the lonely little frame building set here at the edge of the canyon where from the trestle the single track of the Denver & White Horse plunged into the cut. Then he rose, went to the window, wiped off its inner moisture and cupped his hands. The storm was increasing. By dawn, at

How could this masked bandit be doing Arthur Sloane a favor when he robbed the safe?



this rate they'd have to be sending through a snowplow.

On Sloane's table lay a small express package which the night train had just brought down from the bank at Kicking Horse. It was the currency for tomorrow's payroll of the big foundry at Monahan Pass, a mile away. Eighty-five hundred dollars. Sloane took it now to the oldfashioned safe in the corner of his office, put it in, closed the door and twirled the knob.

Barring some emergency call from down the line, Sloane was finished for the night. The frame building here, with hardly a house within a mile of it, was Sloane's home as well as the railway station. The small door beside his table was ajar. From down the inner hallway he could hear the momentary cry of his infant son; and the voices of Paula, his wife, and Elton

Trask, her father, who lived with them.

"Then Paula came to the doorway. "How's it coming, Art? About through?"

He looked up from locking the safe. "Be in shortly. How's father?"

HER FACE clouded. "He's pretty comfortable," she said. A catch was in her voice. "I guess we'll have to get used to what Dr. Greer says." Her lowered tone was drab. "It won't be much more than through the winter, Art."

It would be her father's last illness, that was obvious. They'd have to get used to it. He'd pull through this bronchial condition probably; but another attack of the angina would finish him.... His thin, weak voice from the kitchen sounded now: "Paula, dear—"

She turned hastily away. Sloane went out through the wire door of the partition and began stoking the pot-bellied stove that stood in the waiting room. A crunch of footsteps sounded on the snowy platform; the door opened; two men came in—men in high leather boots, heavy mackinaws and caps. The snow was heavy on them; they shook themselves like dogs.

"You the agent?" one of them said.

Sloane turned. The lamplight fell on the men. One was a big, rough-looking fellow, with iron-gray hair and a three-day stubble of whiskey growth. The other was younger; smaller. He stood huddled in his big coat, like a little weasel, sharp-nosed, with dark eyes peering.

"Closing for the night," Sloane said. "Sorry. No train now till seven-thirty."

The big man grinned. "We're not passengers. Want to see you personally. You're Arthur Sloane? I'm Tim Lambert. This is my friend Willie De Ford. Sit down, Sloane. We won't have any trouble—you look like a smart fellow."

That next half hour was a thing of horror for Sloane. With the little door that led into his living quarters closed, he sat in the waiting room listening to Lambert. The thing at first sounded incredible—old Elton Trask, Paula's father, an escaped jailbird, under sentence for murder, with the law, for fifteen years now, trying to find him! Incredible. But there were so many little things about Trask's past which had puzzled Sloane. Things that Paula did not know, of course, because fifteen years ago she was a child. And when he had married her, two years ago, there had been his conversation with her mother who now was dead. He had never understood it—but now he did....

Numbly, Sloane listened to his visitors. "How do you know all this?" he demanded suddenly.

Lambert grinned. "Well, you see it was this way. A man named Torgenson got robbed, an' in the excitement he got bumped off. Second-degree murder—an' your father-in-law took the rap. His name was Peters then, an' that's his right name. You ask him."

"I intend to," Arthur said grimly.

Sloane was facing the closed door and the single little window of the waiting room. The window was a black rectangle, clouded with moisture. The sash had been down all evening, but it was up now to make just a narrow crack at the bottom. The tense Sloane and his companions did not notice it. Cold air was seeping in; but the waiting room was chill at best, and they did not notice the difference.

Nor could they see that out on the dark storm-swept platform a figure was crouching—the thick, bulky figure of a man with the collar of his snow-covered coat up about his ears, his cap pulled low and the white of his face hidden by a purple mask; a sinister figure, squat, with lumpy shoulders and long, powerful arms that dangled

as like an ape he crouched with an ear to the slit of the window....

"Oh, I'm going to ask my wife's father, all right," Sloane was saying grimly. "Maybe he took the rap, as you call it—but he didn't kill that Torgenson. You know you're lying."

The big Lambert shrugged.

"He sure did," the weasel-faced little De Ford put in. "What the hell—he went to the pen."

Lambert grinned. "The law says he did. That was fifteen years ago—we ain't gonna try the case again, are we? The point is, Sloane—be reasonable now—let's put the cards on the table. Willie an' me—we happened to be in Denver a week ago. A little job which concerned an actress' jewels. You had your wife's father down there in Denver—"

"To a heart specialist," Sloane said. "Go on."

"Well, Willie an' me—once we clapped eyes on him, we knew it was our old pal Peters. So naturally we investigated. An' you bein' express agent here—there's a payroll comes down from Kicking Horse once a week, don't it?"

That payroll was here in the safe now. "So what?" Sloane said.

Again Lambert shrugged deprecatingly. "Peters is sick? That's too bad. If you say so, we better not shock him. Your wife don't know her father's an escaped murderer? We better not tell her, Sloane."

"We was plannin'," De Ford put in, "that it was our dooty to inform the Denver authorities."

"It could be done easy enough," Lambert supplemented. "Just a unsigned letter—or a 'phone call. Just enough to start an investigation." He produced a cigaret and lighted it. "Of course," he added, "if you wanted to dig up say five or ten grand—"

"For blackmail?"

"For two of your father-in-law's old pals who need it," Lambert retorted. A

sudden rasp came into his voice. "Now listen, Sloane—we never pull a job without knowin' what we're doin'. That payroll comes here Friday afternoons. It goes over to the Foundry, an' gets paid out Saturday. Today's Friday, so it must be over there now."

At this mention of a payroll, the listening ape-like figure at the window tensed, and his breath sucked in.

"And you were paymaster at the Foundry up to a year ago," De Ford put in. "You know the inside lay of the place. You can get it, with us outside to handle the watchman."

"You damn sure better had get it," Lambert added. "From there or somewhere else if you can think of a better place."

HE GOT RID of them at last. They didn't know that today the money hadn't come until the late train; that it was here in his safe now. As they rose from the bench and went to the door, the figure on the platform shifted backward and shambled away, lost in the snowy darkness. But it didn't go far; just to a clump of crags beside the track, where again it crouched....

When De Ford and Lambert had gone the shaking, numbed Sloane went in to his living quarters. The little safe in the corner of his office seemed leering at him as he passed it.... Lambert and De Ford had said they would be back at midnight. He knew he couldn't stall them. It was tonight, or never....

The world seemed clattering down on him. Paula's father—going back to jail, an escaped murderer. That would kill him, of course. And what would it do to Paula?

"Oh, hello Paula." Would she notice that his voice was queer? "Father gone to bed yet? Look, I want to speak to him for a minute. Go in with the kid, will you, Paula?"

THE OLD man was bundled up in his dressing gown, seated in a chair

beside his bed. He wasn't really old; only sixty-two. But his hair had always been unnaturally gray, and now the horrible angina with its recurring attacks had wasted him so that he was a mere shell of a man, with pallid sunken cheeks and burning eyes. He looked seventy or eighty.

"Oh, hello Art. You worked late tonight." He smiled wanly. No man could ever have had a better father-in-law. Sloane in these three years had come really to love him. Did Sloane dare ask him now? He had to ask him something; had to verify that this damnable thing so long buried in the past, was true. He made it as gentle as he could; nothing about Lambert and De Ford; just a hint that Paula's mother had given him before she died, and was it true?

God, it was true all right. For that moment the terrified Sloane thought that Trask's heart would kill him. What little color he had, drained from his face, so that his lips and his cheeks were like chalk.

"You—you know?" Trask murmured.

"Now Dad, don't get excited. Of course I've always known. I shouldn't have mentioned it. Let's forget it."

But Trask was clinging to him, shaking. "I didn't do it, Art. That murder—it was a fellow named De Ford, or Lambert—one or both of them that killed Torgenson. But I was there. I was the one got caught."

And you couldn't prove anything now, any more than fifteen years ago.

"Forget it, Dad," the apprehensive Sloane repeated. "What of it? That's all over and done with."

But there was terror in Trask's eyes. "Something's come up, Art?"

"No. Of course not. Forget it."

"Paula's mother would have told you. I never did anything against the law but just that once. Paula, just a little girl then—she was sick. And her mother was sick, needed an operation.

I—I just went into that one thing. Just to rob Torgenson."

Just once against the law. And fifteen years hadn't disposed of it.

"Paula doesn't know?" Trask was murmuring.

"No, of course not," Sloane assured him.

"Oh my God, if she ever did know. If she ever found out that her father—I've tried so hard to be a good father to her."

He went into a fit of coughing. His pleading eyes were tragic. And then he added: "I won't be here—so very many weeks longer, Art. Don't let her know, even after I'm gone."

Just one crime: a robbery that led to murder. You go against the law just once, and it wrecks your life.

"Paula won't ever know," Sloane promised grimly. "Forget it, Dad. It's finished."

The payroll that was here in Sloane's safe... he'd have to make the safe look as though it had been burglarized... just this one crime to try and hush up that other one of fifteen years ago. Sloane knew that he would have to do it.

"Forget it, Dad," he repeated. "Paula won't ever know. I promise."

The sick old man's tragic eyes were thanking him as he grinned and left the room.

- 2 -



T NINE o'clock that same evening down in Denver, thirty-eight miles away, Detective-Sergeant John Moor of the Denver Undercover Squad sat facing Commissioner Rance, with the Commissioner's big flat-top desk between them.

"On that Doris Kent jewel rob-

bery," Commissioner Rance was saying, "I've got a lead. You can take it for what you think it's worth, Moor."

"Let's have it," Moor responded. He was a big, bronzed handsome young fellow. In his dark cheviot suit he looked like a youthful business executive. He smiled. "Lord knows, I need it on that one," he added. "Sort of a blank wall, Commissioner."

"What's she like? You've questioned her pretty closely, of course?"

"When she could spare the time from being interviewed by reporters," Moor said. He bit the end off a cigar and lighted it. "That's about the handsomest young woman you'd ever lay eyes on, Commissioner. Hollywood, her pictures, none of it does her justice. But even at that, you couldn't exactly like her. Too damned conscious of her own beauty. Sort of a spoiled darling."

"The robbery," Rance smiled, "is what concerns us. You think it's on the level? Not just a publicity stunt? That's an old gag, you know. Famous motion picture beauty robbed of her jewels."

"She's capitalizing on it, of course," Moor agreed. "But I had a talk with her son. Kid of twelve—Alan Kent. A little curly-haired fellow, handsome as a little prince. He didn't dream that he heard a noise and that somebody grabbed him in bed and damn near strangled him until he fainted. He's not making it up, just to give his mother publicity."

The gray-haired Commissioner nodded. "Well, why I sent for you, seems the parole board has a young fellow who figures now he's going straight he'll make himself into a Class-A detective." The Commissioner grinned. "Sort of 'crook to Commissioner in ten easy lessons.' Anyway, this ambitious lad has been listening around. He claims that early tonight he overheard a couple of New York crooks—a Tim Lambert and a smallish, weazel-faced fellow, name unknown, mention the

Doris Kent jewel robbery as though they knew more about it than is legal. And, maybe more to the point, they seemed to be planning another job. Something about a foundry payroll. Anyway, our embryo detective followed them. They went to the Central Station, bought tickets for Monahan Pass—and took the seven-eighteen train."

"Where, and what, is Monahan Pass?" Moor demanded.

The Commissioner spread a time table. "Thirty-eight miles up the Denver and White Horse. By what I understand it's a couple of dozen houses, a railroad station a mile away—and a big stove foundry.... That was the last train up for the night."

Moor stared out the window. The yellow-lighted Denver street was swirling with snow. "I'll drive up now," he said. "Lambert and somebody? Give me the best description you've got, Commissioner. Oughtn't to be hard to bump into them in a little place like that. Thirty-eight miles? That isn't much of a drive."

BUT IT WAS, on a night like this. For a few miles, Moor in his small sedan, followed a main highway. Then his route led him to a lonely, rocky road steeply ascending into the wild, ragged mountains. The storm every moment had been increasing in violence. Through the mountain passes the wind came in blasts. In places the rocky road was bare, slippery with ice; in others, fleecy drifts were piled high through which Moor ploughed in imminent danger of stalling.

He took it slowly, cautiously. And it was after midnight when he was approaching his destination. There as yet had been no sign of Monahan Pass—just a dim murky vista of purple white crags and the occasional abyss of the White Horse Canyon. Then he saw a light; a dim yellow shaft from a house window.

- 3 -

It was the railway station. A trestle over the canyon presently was disclosed, with the now almost obliterated single track passing the station and plunging into a ragged rocky cut. The road was steeply ascending from a side angle. And abruptly Moor's overheated engine, laboring with the car through a drift, coughed and gave up the struggle. The back wheels slipped and slid; the car finished in a two-foot ditch. Lugubriously, Detective-Sergeant Moor climbed out and trudged on foot, with the swirling snow and the wind engulfing him. He could see the outlines of the little frame railway station; a bungalow, with the waiting room built onto its side. The living quarters were all dark. There was a small platform light, blurred by the falling snow, and a dim yellow shaft from a window that seemed to be in the waiting room.

Moor was perhaps fifty feet away, and ten feet below the track level when suddenly with a startled exclamation he checked his advance. Off to one side of the station, it seemed that a clump of snow-piled crags yielded a moving blob of figure. A man who had been lurking, watching? Moor's advance seemed to have startled the watching shape. It straightened and scurried rapidly away—the thick figure of a man, awkward on crooked legs, like a great shambling ape. In a moment the storm-murk swallowed it.

Moor, for another interval stood quiet, with his hand in his overcoat pocket gripping the handle of his automatic. Then again he advanced. The snow-piled platform was scuffed with footsteps. Cautiously he went to the lighted window; peered in upon a sight so strange that he caught his breath with startled wonderment. And as he stared, puzzled, he was too absorbed to be aware that in the snowy blur behind him, the ape-like figure was advancing.



T MIDNIGHT that same night, while Detective - Sergeant Moor was still a mile or so away in his little car laboring up the mountain through the blizzard, Arthur Sloane rose quietly from bed. The house was

dark, silent with only the heavy breathing of Paula's father in the adjoining room, and the surge and whine of the wind as it lashed the snow against the windows.

Paula was asleep. Quietly Sloane put on slippers, and a dressing-gown over his pajamas... Then he went into the station. The empty waiting room was dim with the lamp which he had turned low. The waiting room doors, by the rules, were always unlocked. But the door of the heavy wire partition was fastened; the ticket window was closed.

Sloane closed the small door that led to his living quarters and knelt by the safe... His first crime. Just this one. Lambert and DeFord would be here presently, with a faint whistle for a signal that would tell him to come out to them... Blackmailers. They'd be pleased to get the Foundry payroll so easily. They'd go away. But, in a week, or in a month or a year, wouldn't they come back, with appetite whetted for more blood money? Sloane was no fool. He realized the futility of satisfying a blackmailer. But like so many other victims yielding to blackmail, he could see no other course... Old Elton Track's tragic eyes here in the darkness seemed on him now, thanking him...

He laid the sealed package on the floor beside him, tumbled the other contents of the safe into a littered dis-

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SMASHING DETECTIVE STORIES

order, swung the big safe door closed with a click and twirled its knob. What other evidence had he best give of burglary? An expert cracksman might perhaps be supposed to have opened this old-fashioned lock without using force? Vaguely he had heard of such things—sensitive fingertips, or by listening to the click of the tumblers... The thief would close the safe to postpone discovery of the burglary. The wire cage-like door of the partition would have its lock forced. Sloane could do that now...

"Put your arms up. I can shoot through that grating easy enough."

The low menacing voice stiffened Sloane. His arms went over his head. He turned with the dim expectation of seeing Lambert and his weazel-faced companion. But it wasn't the blackmailers. Beyond the grating in the center of the waiting room the squat figure of a man stood with leveled automatic—a man queerly misshapen so that even his great snow-covered overcoat could not hide his ape-like form. His heavy cap was pulled low; and under it, Sloane stared at a purple mask, with eyeholes through which the bandit's eyes darkly glittered.

"Thanks," the masked man added. "Don't make any noise. If you should wake your family up it would be too bad for you—and them." The purple mask covered his mouth so that his voice was muffled.

"What do you want?" Sloane demanded softly. "Take that gun off me. I'm not armed."

On thick bent legs the misshapen figure shambled forward. "Open this door."

The automatic held level. Slowly Sloane stood up, with his dressing gown flapping around his bare ankles. Despite his outward calm, his head was whirling. This package on the floor at his feet, to him was so much more than eighty-five hundred dollars of

foundry payroll... His only chance to buy off blackmailers.

"You want me to let you in?" Sloane heard himself murmuring.

The man in the purple mask laughed softly. "Good boy—how did you guess it?" But as the wire door swung inward, he did not move, just extended his gloved left hand.

"I'll take that package," he added.

Sloane stared into the little black round hole of the automatic's muzzle from which death could so swiftly leap.

"Package?"

"There on the floor—the one you just took from the safe."

Slowly Sloane handed it over.

"Thanks very much." The masked figure stuck it under his arm and backed to the waiting room door. "I wouldn't advise you to move—not 'till I'm pretty well gone, anyway."

The door clicked as he closed it. There was the dim sound of his scuffling, shambling footsteps as he hastily crossed the platform and plunged off into the storm...

IT WAS perhaps ten minutes later when young Detective Sergeant Moor came up the snow-piled road from his stalled car. What the puzzled Moor saw through the waiting room window was a tall, handsome, haggard-faced young man in slippers and a dressing-gown flapping about his bare ankles, who was standing at the opened door of a cage-like wire partition, wrenching at the door-lock with a pair of pliers...

It was all the numbed, despairing, terrified Sloane could think of to do. Lambert and De Ford would come presently. They wouldn't believe his story of a man in a purple mask who already had made away with the payroll... There was nothing he could do to satisfy them. They'd carry out their threats unless he could stall them. He'd try. And whether he could or not, it

[Turn To Page 84]



RACING CAR DRIVER FRANK KOHN SAYS: "THIS REVOLUTIONARY PRODUCT HAS INCREASED MY CAR SPEED & POWER UP TO 50%—STOPPED OIL BURNING"

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Compression Readings—1945 Dodge Truck

	Before	After	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6
1	87 lbs.	100 lbs.	75 lbs.	110 lbs.	75 lbs.	80 lbs.	95 lbs.	105 lbs.
2	100 lbs.	115 lbs.	95 lbs.	115 lbs.	95 lbs.	105 lbs.	118 lbs.	125 lbs.

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Compression Readings — 1948 Pontiac

	Before	After	Cylinder 1	Cylinder 2	Cylinder 3	Cylinder 4	Cylinder 5	Cylinder 6
1	105 lbs.	120 lbs.	95 lbs.	100 lbs.	120 lbs.	110 lbs.	115 lbs.	115 lbs.
2	120 lbs.	135 lbs.	125 lbs.	130 lbs.	125 lbs.	120 lbs.	125 lbs.	135 lbs.
3	120 lbs.	135 lbs.	125 lbs.	130 lbs.	125 lbs.	120 lbs.	125 lbs.	135 lbs.
4	120 lbs.	135 lbs.	125 lbs.	130 lbs.	125 lbs.	120 lbs.	125 lbs.	135 lbs.
5	120 lbs.	135 lbs.	125 lbs.	130 lbs.	125 lbs.	120 lbs.	125 lbs.	135 lbs.
6	120 lbs.	135 lbs.	125 lbs.	130 lbs.	125 lbs.	120 lbs.	125 lbs.	135 lbs.

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wouldn't help Paula any for her husband as well as her father to go to jail. The simplest explanation to give the Sheriff of Monahan Pass was to leave evidence of burglary here...

AT THE sound of the waiting room door opening, Sloane stiffened, pliers in hand.

"Well," Moor was saying, "What in Heaven's name are you doing, young fellow?"

The room blurred before the numbed, terrified Sloane. Moor stood unbuttoning his overcoat, shaking it free of snow. But Sloane could not miss his keen appraising gaze, at the pliers, the broken doorlock and then at the closed door of the safe.

"Who—who are you?" Sloane demanded; and as though with the presage of what was to come, his heart raced for the answer. Surely this alert-eyed man was no would-be passenger, strolling in here in the middle of the night.... "We're closed—no train till morning," Sloane added.

The big man grinned. "You didn't answer my question. What's going on here?" He advanced to the open partition door. Sloane, with his dressing gown wrapped around him, recoiled a little before this man who reached and tweaked at the broken door lock. The unconscious authority in his manner was obvious.... Authority! The word leaped into Sloane's thoughts with so great a premonition of horror that the whole dim scene of the waiting room interior blurred and swayed before his gaze. Had Lambert and De Ford already made good their threats?...

"You're the station agent?" the stranger was saying.

"Yes. I've told you—"

"What's your name?"

"Arthur Sloane. Look here, what do you think you are—I don't like your tone—"

Terror is an unpredictable thing. Certainly Sloane was beyond conscious thought, with only the blurred instinct

to fight to keep his promise to the tragic eyes of Paula's father....

"Well," Moor was saying with a grim laugh, "maybe I arrived just in time. Stop stalling, young fellow. What's going on here? Station agents don't normally come down at midnight in their pajamas and smash door locks."

THOUGHTS are instant things. There wasn't any way now that Sloane in the morning could tell the sheriff that burglars had broken this door. And the payroll, in Sloane's keeping, was gone.... He'd be arrested, jailed. The world seemed clattering around the numbed, blurred Sloane. Moor, with a grim, sarcastic smile, had moved back a few steps and was taking off his overcoat. He had taken his automatic from his overcoat pocket, laid it momentarily on the bench beside him. The lapel of his inner jacket caught in the overcoat as he drew it off. Sloane saw briefly the gleam of metal... his police badge.... The end of old Elton Trask.... It was inevitable that in the whirling chaos of Sloane's mind the conviction leaped that this policeman had come for Paula's father....

"Seem to be a lot of things around here that need investigating," Moor was saying. "Now then, young fellow—"

Sloane flung the heavy pliers. He gave it no conscious thought; he was hardly aware that he had done it, save that within him there was a desperate urge to struggle against this clattering wreck of his little world. The pliers caught Moor a glancing blow on the side of the face and as he reeled backward, the raging Sloane was on him, snatching up the automatic.

"Now, damn you—you're not going to do any investigating. The end of you now. Say your prayers—" Sloane was hardly conscious of his frenzied voice.... Just one crime... the rob-

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bbery of the payroll to pay black-mailers. But one crime leads to another, and here was murder—

"Easy!" Moor gasped. "Take it easy—" He had staggered and fallen to the bench with a hand against his bleeding face; and now he was staring at the shaking muzzle of the automatic as the wild-eyed Sloane pointed it.

"Wait!" Moor gasped again. "You—you're crazy."

"Am I?" Sloane was dimly aware of his finger as it tightened to press the trigger. Then suddenly through the chaos of his mind, came realization that the waiting room door had opened. For that second it distracted him so that he flung a wild sidewise glance; his muzzle wavered aside. The alert Moor had tensed to spring, but a voice from the door checked him:

"Hold quiet, both of you! Drop that gun, you fool!"

In the doorway, the grotesque figure of the man in the purple mask loomed with the murk of the swirling snow behind him. His leveled muzzle was steady; and as Sloane saw it, with terror and perhaps some little instinct of returning sanity, his trembling fingers twitched and Moor's gun dropped with a clatter at his feet.

"Well, that's better," the masked man chuckled. "Keep apart, you two. Up with your hands."

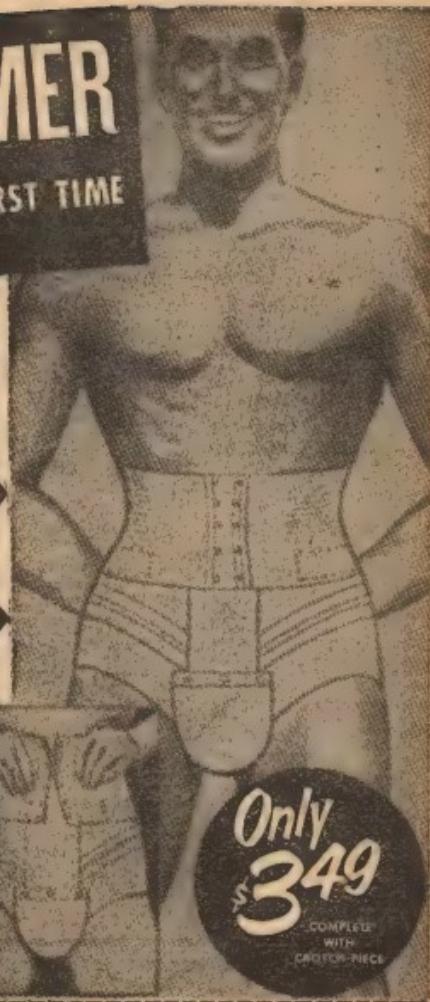
From behind the silken purple mask his gaze glittered. Ape-like he shuffled forward, backing the tense alert Moor and the panting Sloane against the wall. He was thoroughly business-like, this masked stranger; and in a minute or two, with rope and adhesive tape he had his captives bound and gagged, lying on the floor, inert bundles....

FROM WHERE he was lying, Sloane could see the bandit as he bent over the safe, twirling its knob. "How do you open the fool thing?" he demanded. "I haven't time to tackle it." With

[Turn To Page 88]

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a shambling pounce he came and stooped over Sloane, twitching the adhesive up from his chin. "Go on now—give me the combination."

Sloane gave it. "There's nothing in there you want now," Sloane said.

"Is that so? Well, I'll be the judge of that." He went back to the safe. Through the grating Sloane could see his misshapen figure as he bent, turning the knob.... He had rifled the safe in a moment—forty or fifty dollars of the railroad's cash; a few smaller packages.... Nothing of any great value. To Sloane came a stab of despairing irony—what difference now what was taken....

"Well—thanks," the man in the purple mask said. He closed the safe door with a click. And as he stood up, the light gleamed on his eyes glittering darkly in the holes of the purple mask.

"You two lie quiet," he cautioned. "You'll be released in the morning."

In the center of the room he reached, pulled down the lamp which hung by pulley chains, and blew out the light. In the darkness Sloane heard his grim chuckle as he closed the waiting-room door with a crunch, crossed the platform and was gone.

- 4 -

THE NOISE of the storm had so blurred any sounds from the waiting room that Paula Sloane, sleeping in the little house, was not awoken. But as she slept, slowly she was conscious of the bed clothes being

twitched. She opened her eyes upon a flood of terror, to see that the bedroom lamp was burning low; the window was open; and from beside her, Art was gone. And here at her bed stood a man muffled in overcoat and

[Turn To Page 90]

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cap, with a purple mask over his face; a mask through the holes of which his eyes glittered and his voice was a low, blurred guttural rumble.

"Don't scream. If you do that, you'll get hurt."

It struck her numb with terror; but she choked her scream in her throat as she rose on one elbow with a hand against her breast and her long brown braids dangling to the filmy nightrobe over her shoulders.

"That's better," he said. He had stepped back from the bed as though to reassure her, and he added:

"You see I have no intention of harming you." He gestured with his ugly black weapon. "Cover up. You'll take cold."

"What do you want?" she gasped.

"Quiet! Not so loud, you'll wake your father."

"And Art—my—my husband?"

"Oh, he's all right. Take my word I didn't hurt him." One might have thought that under the purple mask he was smiling. Again he gestured. "When I've gone, if you'll wait half an hour or so you can go in and get him. I tied him up in the waiting room. Him, and a friend of his."

She could only numbly stare at the holes of his purple mask with those darkling pools of his eyes behind them.

"What do you want here?" she gasped again.

He took another step backward. He dropped his weapon into his overcoat pocket. "You're not too frightened now to listen carefully to what I have to say?" he demanded. The ironic rasp had left his voice. He seemed trying grotesquely to be gentle. She could see now that his whole aspect was grotesque. His thick figure was squat, with twisted shoulders. On crooked legs he stood swaying, with his arms dangling.

"I'll listen," she murmured. "What—what is it?"

[Turn To Page 92]

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"My—my husband? Tell Art that?"

THE MAN in the purple mask gave a guttural laugh. "Your husband, of course. My God, don't get it mixed! Don't tell the policeman anything. He can't prove anything, and if your husband broke a door, what of it?"

To the confused Paula, they were meaningless words, but she tried to smile.

"I'll do what you say."

"Good. Then you have nothing to be afraid of. I'm going now."

But he didn't go, just stood staring at her as though somberly pondering. And fascinated she stared back, huddled against the pillows with the blanket held to her chin. Queerly it seemed that her terror was lessening, as though with a woman's intuition she sensed something more than strange in this purple-masked misshapen figure so grotesquely trying to be gentle.

"I came in here with the idea you would do me a favor, Mrs. Sloane," he added abruptly.

"A favor?"

"Yes. I did your husband a favor, so I thought you'd do one for me." His hand went to his overcoat pocket, came out with a bit of newspaper that was crumpled into a soggy, dirty ball. "Please listen carefully, Mrs. Sloane."

"I will," she murmured. "What is it?"

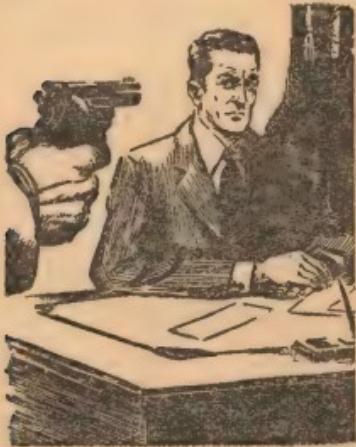
"Down in Denver there's an actress," he said. "Her name is Doris Kent. She's from Hollywood. And she has a boy named Alan. His—his lungs aren't very strong, they've found out, so they thought the high altitude up

THE FACE OF NEMESIS

here in Denver might be good for him."

The voice behind the purple mask was stumbling a little. "You see, Mrs. Sloane, this Doris Kent was robbed of her jewels about a week ago. That made no difference—she's rich—and she'll take good care to get all the publicity that's coming to her. But the damned thieves they—they choked that boy. They dared lay a finger on him."

The gentleness of his voice suddenly was gone under a rasp of fury. His dangling arm came up with a grotesque gesture. "But that's all fixed, Mrs. Sloane. I just thought that maybe you go to Denver sometimes. You do, don't you?"



Wonderingly, she nodded. He was opening the crumpled ball of newspaper now. The bedroom lamplight gleamed on a ring—a chaste circlet of pale gold, with a big sparkling solitaire diamond. An engagement ring.

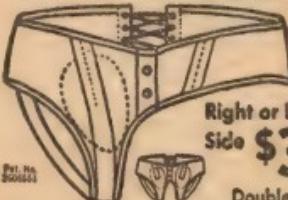
"I wouldn't want her to lose it," the masked man was saying softly. "I thought you wouldn't mind returning it to her, and you—well then maybe you'd tell her that I did your husband a favor." He sucked in his breath. His voice was very strange—half stammering, half with a grotesque wistfulness.

[Turn Page]

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"You could tell her I'm not—quite all bad."

"Why don't you tell her yourself?" Paula suddenly murmured.

He had laid the ring on the dresser by the lamp. At her words he snapped around; stared with his dark gaze. Then suddenly his fingers twitched at the purple mask and it fell to his chin. Involuntarily she gasped with a faint instinctive cry of revulsion as she shrank further back against the pillows, and stared at the monstrous travesty of face that was revealed. As though blasted by fire, the skin was puckered and scarred; the nose twisted; the chin, with bone partly gone, was grotesque; and the mouth was a weird twisted slit, puckered at the corners. A hideous monstrosity, so unhuman that all the character of him which instinctively she had built from his eyes and his voice now was stricken away and he was a thing of revulsion.

IT WAS A momentary shock; then pity came to her. At her cry he had recoiled as though struck a physical blow.

"You see?" he murmured.

"Oh—oh, I'm sorry," she gasped. "You had some terrible accident?"

He let out his breath. "You see I'm—well, I'm handicapped. I can't be with Doris Kent. And that boy—that boy would be frightened if he ever saw me."

His voice and his eyes were tragic, but his puckered mouth with its upturned corners made him seem horribly grinning. Then he raised the purple mask; and at once the grinning travesty was gone and she saw only the pathos of his eyes.

"You'll see her, Mrs. Sloane? You'll tell her I wanted her not to lose the ring."

"Yes, I'll tell her," Mary murmured. "Oh, and I'll tell her—"

[Turn To Page 96]

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"Just that," he said. His gesture checked her. "You might be mistaken if you're too sympathetic. She'll tell you so. There are two sides to everything, Mrs. Sloane. And she's a very beautiful, very talented woman."

He had turned and shambled to the window. "Thank you very much," he said. His voice had an abrupt dignity. "I've already repaid you, by helping your husband."

He dropped from the window, the few feet to the ground. And when she stood there a moment later, she had a brief glimpse of him as furtively he scurried away, shambling like a great ape, with his grotesque figure dwindling until it was gone into the blizzard's murky shadows.

- 5 -



O ARTHUR SLOANE, this scene at dawn in the crowded little waiting room was a blurred chaos of apprehension. The sheriff was here from Monahan Pass, with a crowd of miners and foundry workers so miraculously gathered when Paula had released her husband and Moor; and they had summoned the sheriff by telephone.

And Sloane had listened to Paula's whispered words—meaningless words to Paula—of this strange man in the purple mask. She was so full of emotional theories of that actress in Denver; with a little boy who was sick; and this mysterious bandit with a face so monstrous but with eyes and voice that were only tragic.

Numbly, Sloane listened to her whispered words; but to him there was only the stark reality of impending tragedy

[Turn To Page 98]



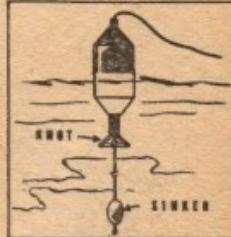
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here.... Paula's father was across the room, wrapped in a dressing gown, with his face flushed and his eyes bright with fever. He had no right to be here, but you couldn't keep him in bed with all this excitement going on. What matter? Sloane realized now that this policeman Moor didn't know anything about the past; that had been Sloane's frenzied assumption. But the foundry payroll was gone; and Lambert and De Ford would think that Sloane had double-crossed them; they'd 'phone to the authorities in Denver; the horrible past of Paula's father would be raked up....

"That man in the purple mask said he had done you a favor," Paula was whispering. "What did he mean?"

A favor? Sloane had no idea....

HEY, SHERIFF! My God, come down here!" It was the voice of one of the men calling from outside, where the growing daylight had disclosed the bodies of Lambert and De Ford, lying in a distant clump of rocks, half buried by the snow. Both were knifed. In Lambert's pocket was a woman's chamois jewel bag. The bag of Doris Kent. Her name was in it, scribbled on a bit of paper. And the bag was empty. This hijacker had robbed the thieves of their loot.

Everybody thought, of course, that that was his only motive. Everybody but Sloane, who knew that it was the murder of Torgenson of fifteen years ago—and perhaps mostly the strangling of a sick little boy a week ago—which now were avenged.

And abruptly Sloane realized that here in this waiting room, two hours

ago, he had come so very close to murdering Moor—if the man in the purple mask hadn't intervened!

They were opening Sloane's safe now. Very strange, very inexplicable things indeed had happened here tonight, for despite Moor's and Sloane's tale of a masked bandit, there seemed to be nothing missing from the littered safe. Certainly the foundry payroll was here. It had been taken by the man in the purple mask, Sloane realized, so that Sloane could not give it to the blackmailers; and then later, the mysterious bandit had replaced it in the safe!

"What the devil were you doing breaking the lock of that partition door?" Moor murmured presently to Sloane.

The weight of the world seemed suddenly to have lifted from the amazed Sloane, and he smiled.

"I'm sorry I attacked you, Sergeant," he said. "I've got a hot temper sometimes. You had me all wrong—I was taking that doorlock off to fix it, not to smash it."

Then Arthur Sloane was holding his young wife close, and kissing her. "It's all right now, Paula," he whispered. "Everything is so much more all right than you realize."

But her mind was on a beautiful actress in Denver, with a little son who wasn't very well. And to Paula Sloane then came a vision of that grotesque figure in the purple mask, with tragic eyes as he had stared at her; and then had climbed through the window, shambling off like a great ape to lose himself in the shadows of the stormy darkness.

If it had been an accident, the cigaret would have been entirely consumed by the flames. Since part of the cigaret was found, that showed it had been planted after the fire had done most of the damage.

ANSWER

to the Riddle of
"The Cigaret Clue"



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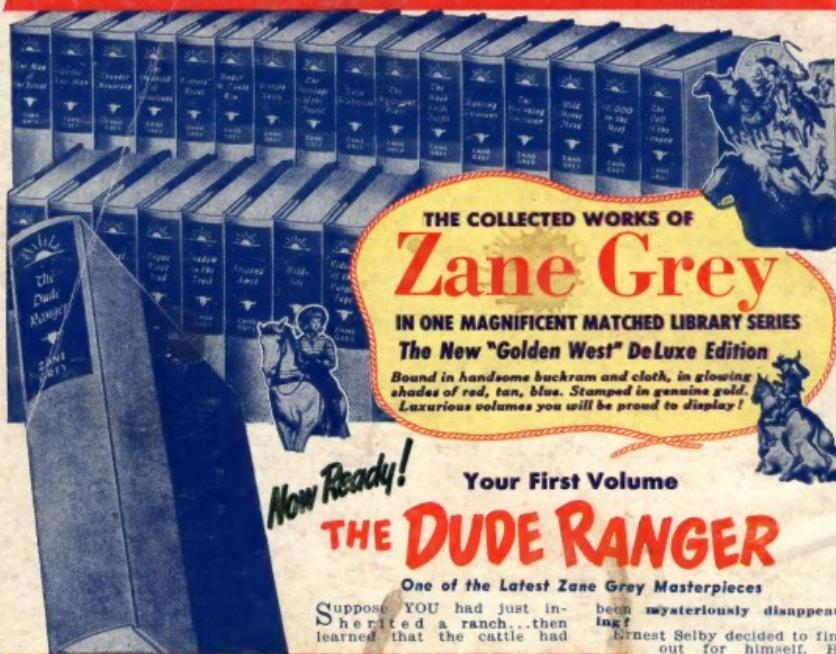
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